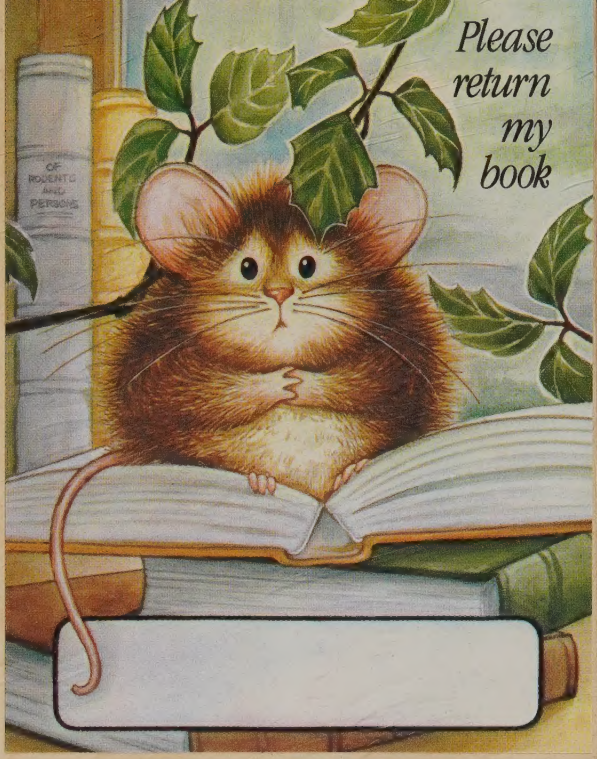
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# THE GIRL SCOUT

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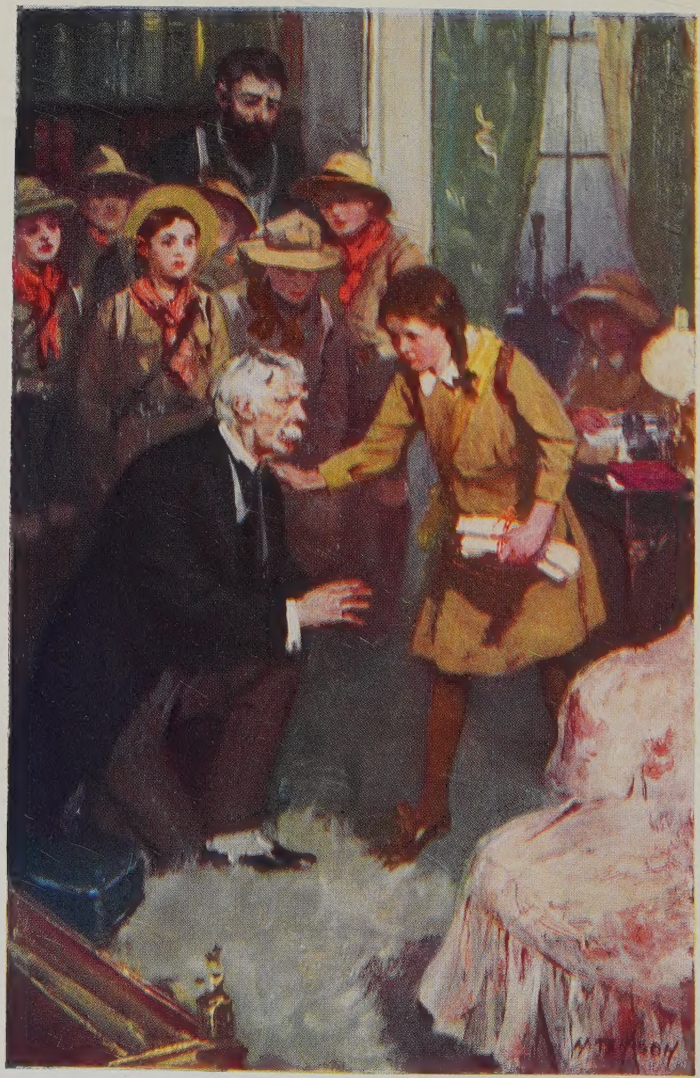

"AGGIE THRUST INTO THE COLONEL'S HANDS A BUNDLE OF PAPERS TIED UP WITH RED CORD."

# The GIRL SCOUT

BRENDA GIRVIN

HUMPHREY·MILFORD
OXFORD·UNIVERSITY
·PRESS·
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## CHAPTER I

### THE RIVALS

"I SAY, Aggie, there's been a burglary at Woodbourne!" A boy wearing a Scout uniform had dashed into the garden surrounding the low white house which stood on the crest of a hill. Over this hill, the main road, skirting the forest tract known as the Bourne Woods, mounted from Rexford, the nearest town some eight miles distant, and dipped into Ashleigh, the little village on whose outskirts the White House stood.

In the garden of this White House a girl was working. She had turned thirteen. Her scanty brown hair was strained back from her forehead, and was tied up with a piece of crumpled dark blue ribbon. Her face was oval-shaped, and was tanned from constant exposure to the weather. The moment that you saw her, you knew that she was an "outdoor" girl. Her eyes were dark brown in colour, their expression was keen and ferrety. She wore a dirty holland overall. The hat, which should have been on her head, was slung by its school ribbon, on to a prickly gooseberry bush. She was Agnes Phillips, and she lived with her parents and her brother in that White House which stood on the crest of the hill.

It was her brother Peter who had at that moment dashed into the garden, with his startling news. He was her junior by one year.

There were people who said that Aggie should have been the boy, and Peter the girl. Not that he was the least bit girlish in his ways; far from it! Was he not the Leader of the "Panthers," a Scout Patrol founded recently in Ashleigh by a Colonel Norton, the very Colonel Norton who owned the burgled Woodbourne, and who was an enthusiastic supporter of the Boy Scout movement—an enthusiastic supporter, in fact, of every movement which had for its object the development of England's resources.

Peter, though, had dreamy blue eyes, a pink-and-white complexion, and a real "cupid-bow" mouth. He used to get "just mad" when Aggie taunted him about his mouth. Perhaps it was only because he was very musical that there came into his eyes, sometimes, that dreamy, far-off look, for certainly when engaged upon Scout business he was not the least bit dreamy. If he were interested in a thing he could be as keen about it as Aggie herself, who was vitality personified.

"There's been a burglary at Woodbourne?" gasped Aggie.

She had run towards her brother. In the excitement of the moment she did not notice that she had upset the tin can full of salty water, with which she had been working on the lawn to bring up worms, and that the water had trickled over her shoes and stockings. Aggie never noticed details of this kind.

Woodbourne, the Colonel's house, lay on the opposite side of Ashleigh village to the White House. To its situation it owed its pretty sounding name, for it had been built on the very edge of those Bourne Woods which extended for miles and miles, and into which the Colonel's garden merged. A narrow track led from this garden into the heart of the woods, up

to the foot of an oak tree, so massive and so thickly branched, that even in the forest, full of stout timber, it stood out as a landmark. Oak Tree Pathway was the name which the Scouts had given to that track.

Woodbourne did not stand upon the main road: it had been built upon an off-shoot. So undulating was the country that, standing on a hill itself, Colonel Norton's home faced not only Crest Hill, but another hill known as Combe Ridge.

In the Georgian house, which stood upon this Ridge, there lived a friend of Peter's named Alec Tylston, but nicknamed "Danger" from the colour of his hair, which was bright red.

Ashleigh prided itself on the fact that no house had been erected within its precincts during the last fifty years. All the houses lying between Ashleigh and Rexford were old houses, but the oldest of them all perhaps was the house which stood beyond Combe Ridge, and whose fields stretched right up to the foot of that same hill. This house was known as Chimney House, and belonged to the widow of one who, in his lifetime, had been a great authority in the village—Farmer Gale.

Aggie was jabbering hard to Peter all the while.

"Oh, I hope they haven't taken his cups," she was saying, "his beautiful silver cups!"

"Not one cup has been left!" Peter was bursting with the news. "The polo cup, the 'gym' cup, the tilting cup, the swimming cup," Peter counted them up on his fingers as he named them, "they're all gone; so's the salver, which had been accidentally left upon the piano."

"But isn't he most dreadfully upset?" cried Aggie.

"I should think he is! Who wouldn't be?"

"But won't he get them back? Who—who's

taken them ? " Aggie was thirsting for more information, but Peter gave it sparingly.

" How like a girl ! " he retorted. " Wouldn't he get them back if he knew who'd taken them ? "

" Has the clock gone too, the presentation clock from the library mantelpiece ? Oh, I hope it hasn't, for only yesterday he said that he'd rather any one took all his possessions than that clock, which, for some unknown reason, he seems to value beyond all else."

But the clock, Peter told Aggie, had been left untouched ; the drawing-room only had been ransacked.

" Do tell me all about everything," coaxed Aggie eagerly, for Peter had turned away as though to go indoors, and Aggie felt she hadn't heard half enough.

" You'd only blab about it to the girls at school if I did."

" Of course if you don't want to tell me ! " Aggie said, and she swung round on her heels and tossed her head.

But, as a matter of fact, Peter wanted to tell Aggie very much indeed. He was dying to recount the whole affair.

" Henry, Danger, and I were down looking at the Club Room," he began ; " we'd agreed to meet there directly after lunch."

The Club Room to which he referred was a disused barn, belonging to Widow Gale, which the Scouts had rented recently at a very moderate sum. This room they used as a playroom, a reading-room, a rendezvous in which to hold their meetings, and a place in which to pursue the particular arts and crafts in which each member took an interest. But the room was barren of all furniture. This was a very sore point with the Scouts. By dint of saving the weekly allowance of twopence which each boy received, and exercising rigid economies in the purchase

of such luxuries as sweets, the Patrol had contrived to scrape together sufficient funds to enable them to take possession of the room. Not one penny, though, had remained to spend upon its equipment, though the " Panthers " longed to see the room replete with all necessities, like the Club Room of the " Hyenas," a neighbouring Patrol which, a week ago, had invited the " Panthers " to a " Ju-Jitsu " afternoon.

The " Panthers " must shortly return hospitality to the " Hyenas." They must receive them in an unfurnished Club Room, unless in the very immediate future any stroke of unexpected good fortune should come within their reach. The thought of receiving the " Hyenas " with any less magnificence than they themselves had been received, was galling to the " Panthers' " pride.

" As I said before," continued Peter, digging into the ground with the thick oaken staff of the flag which, as Leader of the " Panthers," he carried, " Henry, Danger, and I were down looking at the Club Room. Suddenly, when we were least expecting him, the Colonel came into the room. He hadn't knocked, and he was looking as though something very dreadful had happened. ' Boys,' he said "— and Peter made a very good attempt at imitating the Colonel's voice and pose—" ' I've been burgled. All my cups, my beautiful cups, my collection of years, has disappeared from the drawing-room ! ' "

" Oh ! " Aggie gasped. " Poor, poor Colonel ! What did you say Peter ? "

Then Peter put on the important air which Aggie said was part of his equipment.

" I asked at once whether the window in the drawing-room had been bolted or not ? And the Colonel seemed quite delighted when I offered this

suggestion. 'That's a good idea, Phillips,' he said twice, 'quite a good idea, Phillips. Now I come to think of it, that window wasn't bolted.'

"Then, before I'd time to ask the question, Danger had piped in with it. 'Can't we try to find the burglars? When Commander White's house was burgled in the spring, the police never found a trace of the thieves. Mayn't we try and see if we can do better than the police?' And the Colonel clapped Danger on the back.

"'That was just what I was going to ask you to do,' he said. 'I was going to ask my Scouts to try and find the whereabouts of the thief, or thieves, who have made off with my property. On Monday you shall report progress at the meeting.'

"Then," said Peter, "he took a piece of paper from his pocket, and he asked Danger for a pencil, but Danger hadn't one, so Henry offered his. There and then he wrote this notice, which he pinned on to the wall so that the whole Patrol might see it."

Peter read out the notice which he had copied into his notebook—

"'FIVE POUNDS REWARD WILL BE PAID TO THE ASHLEIGH PATROL IF, ON OR BEFORE MONDAY EVENING NEXT, INFORMATION BE GIVEN WHICH WILL LEAD TO THE CAPTURE OF THE THIEF OR THIEVES WHO WERE AT WOODBOURNE HOUSE LAST NIGHT, AND AS TO THE EXACT WHEREABOUTS OF THE MISSING PROPERTY.

"'(Dated) Wednesday, September 28.'

"We have a Scout meeting," Peter volunteered, "on Monday evening next at five o'clock."

"You mean to find the burglars?" Aggie asked.

"Mean to find them?" Peter cried. "Mean to beat Baine and his men? You bet we do! Ours,

though, is to be quite a private venture; the police are not to know that they have rivals in the field. Why, don't you see," he had drawn close to Aggie now, "that besides winning honour and glory for the Patrol, we should be able, with the five pounds reward, to furnish our Club Room, to furnish it as well, even better, than the 'Hyenas'' room was furnished?"

"Have you looked for any 'sign' yet?" Aggie asked.

"Have I had the time?" Peter answered. "The moment the Colonel told us, I had to fly back here to get my books together for the 'Oxo class.'"

The Oxo class was the name which the boys had given to the special Oxford class, held on Wednesday afternoons, for those boys who were entering at Christmas for the Junior Oxford Examination.

"I do call it hard luck," Peter grumbled, "having the Oxo class this afternoon."

"Alas, my poor brother!" said Aggie flippantly. But Peter was in no mood for jesting.

"It's a two hours' class," he continued rather crossly. "It won't be over until five. We can't do a thing until after five. At five o'clock we're going to gather at the Club Room, then we're going to march up to the Colonel's house and make investigations. Then, What ho! for the robbers and their booty."

"I wish I could help to find the robbers!" Aggie sighed.

"You help to find the robbers? Why, you're a girl, and girls can't be scouts!" said Peter.

"But girls can be scouts," retorted Aggie. "In lots of places there are Girl Patrols. I've heard of them." She walked a few steps away. She was thinking deeply, and when Aggie thought deeply she wrinkled up her forehead in such a way that the cross lines made an "m" between her eyebrows.

She turned back suddenly.

"I don't see why we shouldn't have a Patrol of Girl Scouts here in Ashleigh," she exclaimed.

She was facing Peter. Her eyes were flashing fire. Unconsciously, she had braced herself up to ward off the attack which Peter was bound to make on her. Every turn of her thin active little body spelt revolt.

Peter was making patterns with the worms she had unearthed. He desisted. He tossed his head back and began to laugh immoderately.

"Yah!" he ridiculed, "what use would a Girl Patrol in Ashleigh be, I should like to know? Who would you get to join it?"

"There's Ruth, and Joan, and Phyllis, and Patty, and B[illegible]," and Aggie named her especial friends who were in her form at school.

"Do you think for a moment you'd be likely to find the burglars?" Peter cried. "Why, you'd all run away directly you caught sight of them!"

"*I* wouldn't," Aggie answered stoutly. "I don't see," she continued, "why girls shouldn't track burglars every bit as well as boys."

She gathered up the bucket, out of which the water had been spilt, and the broom which she had been using, to carry them indoors.

"As if a heap of girls would do anything when they got together, but talk, and talk, and talk!"

"We shouldn't talk any more than you do," Aggie snapped. "Why, when you and Henry are together one can't get a word in edgeways. You're always down on girls, you're the horridest brother that any one ever had," and Aggie, throwing down the bucket, began to chase Peter round the garden with the broom.

She chased him along the narrow paths that wound between the flower-beds, into the kitchen garden, past

the stables, until they reached a disused chicken-house. Here, he *must* be cornered since that portion of the garden was bounded by a wall too high for him to scale. There was but one means of escape, and that way was back past Aggie and the broom! Aggie's " black monkey " had been roused.

Peter had none too pleasant a remembrance of Aggie's " black monkey "! He knew she would not scruple to thrust that broom into his face if she had a chance of doing so. For one moment he looked helplessly around him. On his right was the chicken-house. He still carried the staff to which the flag was slung. Be trapped by Aggie? Never! In an instant, with that agility which made him top boy in the " gym " class, he had sprung, with the assistance of the staff, on to the roof of the outbuilding, and from this unassailable position he looked down with a smile of aggravating superiority upon his untidy, dirty, hatless sister.

He danced a war-dance on the galvanized roof of the chicken-house and waved the flag above his head.

" Yah-bo, yah-bo, yah-bo! " he shouted. He laughed at Aggie and taunted her.

" What ho! What ho! " he called out, as she turned away to go sulkily indoors. " What ho! for the Patrol of the Ashleigh Girl Spouts! "

## CHAPTER II

### THE MYSTERIOUS TRIO

Aggie didn't sulk for long. Sulks with Aggie was ever a thing of the moment. Her busy little mind was occupied with the evolving of a great idea. So

obsessed was she with this idea that she could think of nothing else. When she reached the house she hurried across the hall and raced up the stairs. On the landing, still racing, she collided with her mother, who had come out from her room ready dressed for calling.

"Fearfully sorry! Where off to, Mummie dear?" said Aggie, all in one breath, as she drew up and threw her arm about her mother's neck and gave her a big hug.

"I'm going down to the Marshalls," Mrs. Phillips answered. "I promised I'd be there by a quarter past three."

"And it's a quarter to now," Aggie said, "so if you're going down in the car you've heaps and heaps of time! Oh! please, Mummie, couldn't I go with you?" Aggie pleaded. And when her mother answered in the affirmative she hugged her again.

"I want to see Ruth fearfully much," she continued. "Going down with you in the car will save me heaps of time! I've only two hours before the boys come out from school."

"Only two hours before the boys come out from school? To save time?" her mother queried.

"Oh, you mustn't ask any questions, Mummie," Aggie coaxed. "I've something very special to do before the boys come out from school, that's all. It's about this something very special that I want to see Ruth."

"But your overall?" her mother said. "Oh, Aggie dear, it's filthy!"

"I'll change it in a minute, Mummie," Aggie answered. "Or, if you haven't time to wait until I've changed it, I'll cover it with my 'Polar Bear.' I don't care if I am too hot, I don't care for anything

at this moment so long as I see Ruthie. Dear old 'Polar Bear,' he's been used a crowd of times to cover a multitude of sins."

"Polar Bear" was the name which Aggie and her friends had given to the white blanket coats they used at school to put on after games.

But Mrs. Phillips said that she would wait whilst Aggie changed her dress.

"I'll be just as quick as I can, truly," Aggie cried, as she ran towards her own room, which lay at the end of the corridor, and was opposite to the room that Peter occupied.

"Oh, Aggie! I had forgotten," her mother called her back. "Your Aunt Margaret motored over while you were at school this morning, and she left a present, which I quite forgot to give you until this moment."

"A present?" echoed Aggie.

Her mother had fetched a flat parcel from her room, which she placed in Aggie's outstretched hands, for Aggie had returned to receive the gift. But her face fell when she unwrapped the paper covering, for the package contained a red silk sash.

Aggie did not care for finery.

"Of course it's very pretty," she drawled, "and very kind of Auntie."

"Your Auntie wants you to wear it at the theatricals," her mother said. Amateur theatricals were to take place at Aggie's school on the following Saturday evening.

"Of course I'll wear it," Aggie answered, as she ran back to her own room. She flung the sash down on to her bed, for she had not time to fold it away neatly, since her mother had already gone downstairs to wait the arrival of the car.

A few moments later, a tidily dressed Aggie in a

clean starched print frock, came bounding down the stairs two steps at a time.

"Quite a 'wash-tub' girl now, aren't I, Mummie dear?" and she followed her mother out on to the drive, and took her place beside the chauffeur in the motor.

"You won't mind if I sit by Pearson?" she asked a little apologetically. "You see, I do so love to watch him drive."

When Aggie was very keen upon a thing, she talked incessantly the whole time. As soon as they had turned out through the gates, and were gliding along the main road which led towards Rexford (for the Marshalls lived on the Rexford side of Ashleigh), she began to talk to Pearson.

"Have you heard that there's been a burglary at Colonel Norton's?" she inquired. But Pearson had not heard a word about the burglary.

"We think that the burglar got in through the window," Aggie volunteered. "Through the drawing-room window, I mean, because it was the drawing-room that was burgled. All Colonel Norton's silver cups have gone. I wish we knew who'd taken them, because it's hateful, isn't it, to think of a burglar being at liberty who might burgle you at any unsuspecting moment?"

Pearson was immensely interested in the Woodbourne robbery.

"Now I come to think of it," he said, "I did see a queer-looking couple round Colonel Norton's house yesterday afternoon, when I was waiting outside for Mrs. Phillips in the car."

"You did?" said Aggie keenly. "Oh! please tell me all about them?"

"There was a man," said Pearson, "a foreign-looking chap."

"Was he fat, or thin, dark, or fair, had he blue eyes, or brown?" asked Aggie, all excitement.

"Well, I can't say about the colour of his eyes, Miss," Pearson answered, "but I did notice that he had a dark moustache, and his clothes were that shabby that I shouldn't care to be seen in them myself, outside the workhouse."

"Who was with him?" Aggie asked. "You said you saw a couple?"

"He had a woman with him."

Aggie was eagerly absorbing every item of information.

"She was like what?" Aggie asked.

"Well, she was most ways like a woman."

"But her hair, her eyes, her dress?"

"'Deed, Miss, I haven't an idea about them things," continued Pearson. "I'd have looked if I'd had a notion you'd be wanting to hear."

"Did you speak to them, did they speak to you?"

"Now you ask me that, Miss, I do recollect that one of them did speak to me."

"Which one of them?" asked Aggie, all impatience.

"The woman, Miss, the woman who was carrying the baby."

This was the first that Aggie had heard of the baby.

"You never told me that there was a baby," she said in an aggrieved tone. "And was it a dear, cuggly little thing, with a wrinkled face?"

But Pearson had not seen anything of the baby, for, as he explained to Aggie, it had been wrapped up closely in a shawl.

No sooner had Pearson mentioned the word shawl, than Aggie must know all about it.

"What kind of a shawl was it?" she inquired.

"A shepherd's plaid, Miss, as near as I can say."

"What did she say to you, this woman with the baby? Was she begging for her little child?"

"No," said Pearson. "She asked me if I could tell her the way to Woodbourne? It struck me as being funny like, because she was standing by the gates; so I told her, 'It's there behind you,' and she went on thanking me, in her queer, rough voice, until I was out of hearing. I might have been out of hearing, but I wasn't out of seeing, and I saw that neither she nor the man turned into Woodbourne. They sat there on the roadside, her dandling the baby, and him sitting beside her, and they was watching all the time as though they was watching for some one."

"Then?" said Aggie.

"Then," said Pearson, "your mother came out, Miss, and I never gave that lot another thought until this minute."

That was all the information that Aggie could glean from Pearson.

They were in sight now of the Marshalls' house. It was a gabled house, built of granite. Aggie turned round in her seat.

"Mummie," she said, "Mummie, did Peter tell you, I wonder, that the Colonel's house had been burgled last night? He didn't? Well, it was, and Pearson thinks the burglars were a foreign man, and a woman who was with him. The woman was carrying a baby. You won't tell Peter about this mysterious trio, will you, Mummie?" Aggie pleaded, "because I want to find the burglars mine own self."

"But how unfortunate!" said her mother, "for only yesterday, when I was at tea at Woodbourne, I was admiring the cups."

"Whew!" said Aggie, turning round in her seat, "that was a narrow shave!" They had overtaken

two men carrying heavy loads. The men had not attempted to move out of the way of the car, and the mudguard had only just succeeded in shaving the broad baskets of turf which the men were bearing.

"Wasn't that Holland and Peterson?" inquired Aggie, as she turned to look at the men whom they had passed. "They were working for us in the spring, weren't they Pearson?"

"They were, Miss," Pearson answered. "Now they're doing odd jobs for Commander White."

"B♯'s father," murmured Aggie to herself

"In their spare time," continued Pearson, "they carry turf to Chimney House. Widow Gale means to re-turf her lawn next Wednesday if there's any rain before then."

"I should think there would be some this very afternoon," said Aggie promptly. "It looks fearfully like rain, doesn't it, Mummie?" She had turned again to her mother.

Her mother looked up apprehensively, for threatening black clouds had gathered overhead.

"Yes, I shouldn't be surprised if we had a downpour any moment. It's a pity that you didn't bring your brown raincoat instead of your 'Polar Bear.'"

"No matter, Mummie," Aggie answered. "Here we are at last!" she said, as Pearson turned in through the gates of Granite Hall.

"Why!" she exclaimed as she stood up in the car, "there's Ruthie, Phyllis, Joan, B♯ and Patty in the Long Field. Whatever are they doing, I wonder? Can they be rehearsing for the theatricals? No, they are holding long, whitey-looking things in their hands. Yes, surely Patty's binding up Joan's arm! Oh! Pearson, let me get down, please! Don't say anything about the burglary at Woodbourne to

anybody yet awhile," she added to her mother, "because if Peter found out I'd told you he'd say that I'd been spouting."

"I'll walk home, Mummie," Aggie called back over her shoulder as she turned off the drive and ran across the grass patch leading to the Long Field in which she had espied her friends.

"Ho! Ruthie, ho!" Aggie cried out, in her piping voice.

The girl who was standing with her back to Aggie turned round quickly. She was a girl of Aggie's own age, and wore her fair hair in a thick plait, which reached down to her waist.

"It's Aggie!" she exclaimed. "Girls, it's Aggie Phillips!"

"But whatever are you playing at?" Aggie asked, as she joined them in the Long Field.

"*Playing* at?" Ruth exclaimed. "We're not playing at anything. Patty's showing us lovely things. Last night her father taught her how to tie reef knots, how to do real proper bandaging, and now she's showing us, and we're practising in case we ever want to be Girl Scouts."

## CHAPTER III

### THE "SPOUTS"

"To be Girl Scouts?" cried Aggie, as she flung herself on to the ground beside her friends. "Why! that's what I've come here to suggest: to propose that we should all of us form ourselves this minute into a Patrol!"

The girls had gathered slowly round Aggie. On

her right and left were Patty and B♯; Patty Pettlet was the doctor's daughter, and she it was who had been responsible for the bandaging fever to which her friends had one and all succumbed that afternoon.

Patty was a true Irish type—grey eyes, dark hair, and a complexion mellow as a peach. B♯ was standing up leaning over Patty's shoulder. She had earned this name from the fact that she was just a little sharp in temper sometimes, and rather sharp featured in appearance.

At Aggie's feet lay Joan. Joan was the kind of girl who would always lie at anybody's feet. She was quiet and demure—a slight girl, and a marked contrast to her sister Phyllis, who was very round and fat: her face was round, and her eyes were round; she wore round spectacles; her legs were like round pillars, the same width all the way down. Some wag had long ago named her "F.F."—Fat Phyllis.

"You mean all of us to be the Patrol?" Patty was chattering on.

"Yes," said Aggie, "we six, we six friends. I have a particular reason for wanting to form a Patrol at this very minute," she continued, "Only——" She looked about her furtively, then she lowered her voice. B♯ sat down upon the ground with the others. "It's all to be a dead secret, and you must none of you divulge it to any one without my special permission. We're to be a Secret Service Patrol, as it were; no one is to know that there are such things as Girl Scouts in Ashleigh—least of all the Boy Scouts themselves—until we have accomplished that great thing which we have set out to perform."

"And that is?" Ruth asked.

"Whist!" said Aggie, and she put her finger to her lips. Again she looked about her cautiously.

They all drew a little closer round her. The reef knots and the bandaging were forgotten. Joan did not even remember that she still had her arm in a sling.

"There's been a burglary," Aggie whispered, "a burglary at Colonel Norton's. Peter told me. He was at the Club Room when he heard of it. Colonel Norton came down to the Club Room to tell the boys, because he wants the Scouts to find the burglars. He believes they can. He seems to think the boys can do anything. He will give five pounds to the Patrol if, on or before Monday next, they give information respecting the whereabouts of the burglars. Wouldn't you love to track the burglars? I would. I'd love to hunt for 'sign,' to follow up clues, to work until I'd caught the villains red-handed. Oh! I would, I would. And why shouldn't we? Colonel Norton said he'd give five pounds to the Patrol who traced the burglars, but he didn't say whether the Patrol was to consist of girls or boys. Of course the boys scorn the idea of Girl Scouts doing anything or being any good. What matter? Let us prove the boys are wrong. Let us form ourselves into a Patrol. I'll be Patrol Leader, and Ruth shall be Corporal, and you others shall be Scouts. Let us prove ourselves worthy of the name of Scouts. Let us prove that girls are equal to boys and just as quickwitted. Let's—let's find the burglars who entered Colonel Norton's house last night and stole his cups and salver."

Ruth clutched hold of Aggie by the hand. "Let's," she exclaimed, "let's be a Secret Service Patrol!"

"Secret," said B♯, "until we have proved our mettle; proved, by tracking down the burglars, by outwitting the boys, that not only are the girls Scouts in name, but Scouts in deed as well."

"We must do the thing quite properly," said Ruth: "swear ourselves in, have a name, a uniform dress, and a call, known only to ourselves."

"But I don't see how we can get a uniform?" Joan demurred. "I am sure that mother would object to buying Phyl and me new dresses."

"As if anybody was going to have new dresses!" Aggie cried.

"Our 'gym' tunics now," suggested Patty.

"Oh yes," said Ruth, "they're brown, just the colour of the trees. They'll be grand."

"And we'll wear our yellow dancing sashes," Patty cried, "fastened crossways over our shoulders."

"We'll wear school satchels for haversacks," Aggie piped in quickly, "and we'll get garden sticks for staves; and because I'm leader I must have someing special tied on to my staff. Suppose now," Aggie sprang to her feet, "we all go home as quickly as we can, and agree to meet in half an hour's time, that is to say, at a quarter past four, at the Oak Tree in the woods? Then I'll enrol you all as members, and we'll march straight to the Colonel's house to search for 'sign.' By Monday we will have proved to Peter that girls can be scouts! Why, do you know," she was still boiling with rage at the very thought, "do you know what he said when I suggested we should have a Girls' Patrol in Ashleigh—do you know what he dared to call us? He said we couldn't be scouts because we talked too much. He called us——" Aggie paused, "'The Girl Spouts'!"

"Oh!" Ruth joined in quickly, "what a gorgeous name for our Secret Service Patrol. The boys are the 'Panthers'; let us be the 'Spouts'!"

. . . . .

Half an hour later, the "Spouts," as arranged, met under the famous Oak Tree.

The Oak Tree was approached from the main entrance of the woods by a broad, muddy track, which, upon reaching the Oak Tree, diverged into two narrow pathways, closely turfed. One of these, bearing to the left, led to a distant house known as the Lonely Farm; the other to the town of Rexford. The Oak Tree was surrounded by a patch of bare grass, beyond which there stretched a mass of bushy undergrowth.

Aggie was the last to arrive upon the scene. The others were impatiently awaiting her arrival.

"Now," she said, "we simply haven't a minute to waste, so I'm going to swear you all in without more delay. First, however," she announced, "I have something to give you," and to each "Spout" she handed a piece of cord. "You're to wear the cord knotted round your necks," she commanded. "Each of you has to do a good action every day; until that good action has been accomplished, you may not untie the cord."

Each girl knotted the cord, as she received it, round her throat.

They were all very conscious of their tunics, sashes, and high garden sticks.

On her return home, Aggie had found lying on the bed her new red silk sash. Without a moment's hesitation, she had tied it on the stick, which she had coaxed out of the gardener. With much gusto, she now flourished her staff, which looked rather more like a bridesmaid's wand than a Patrol flag!

"I'm going to stand with my back to the Tree," she said, "and you're all to form a circle, about five yards away from me. In turn, you are to approach me on your knees. As you approach, you are to

give me, your leader, the full salute, that is to say, you are to hold your hands right above your head, with your three fingers upright, and your thumb laid on your little finger. This is the proper 'Scout' salute," she announced proudly. "I learnt it from Peter.

"When you have given me the salute," she continued, "you're to place your left hand on your hip, and your right hand on your heart, and you're to say, each of you in turn, 'I, Ruth Marshall, or I, Patricia Pettlet, or I, Beatrice White, or I, Joan, or Phyllis Drummond, promise to obey my leader, promise not to reveal the existence of our Secret Patrol, promise to work my best to unravel the woeful mystery surrounding the house of Woodbourne; promise, above all else, to be loyal now and for evermore, to the "Spouts"!'"

## CHAPTER IV

### THE AERO-DESTROYER

THE library at Woodbourne House overlooked the drive. To the left lay the Bourne Woods, and a few paces from the window was the rustic gate, through which one must pass to strike the broad track leading into their heart.

In the window, which was square-shaped, stood the Colonel's writing-desk. At this writing-desk the Colonel was seated. He was poring over some papers which were spread before him. Whether any one came down the drive or no concerned him not at all. He was far too engrossed in the work upon which he was engaged to take any notice of

casual passers-by. He was engrossed with the designs of an airship of such proportions, of such efficiency, as had never yet been conceived. At the War Office, Colonel Norton was already known as a man of great ideas and inventive genius. To those "High in Authority" he had already shown the rough plans of this powerful adjunct of modern warfare. So firm was their belief in this wonderful invention, that they had sworn him to secrecy, and no one dreamed that this quiet man, in his pretty country home, was working for the perfection of an "Aero-Destroyer" which should make England a power to be feared by air as by land and water. Those "High in Authority" were fearful lest some foreign power should glean knowledge of this deadly invention before the diagrams, necessary to its execution by the skilled hands of able workmen, should have been completed.

The Colonel surveyed the sketches he had made, read, with a frown upon his face, the closely-written manuscript, their necessary complement. Then he pushed the drawings and manuscripts aside. He took up the letter which he had received that morning from those who had concerned themselves with his great work. They were urging him to even greater secrecy, for they were fearful all the while lest the newspapers should hear of this Destroyer, and that through the newspapers, that foreign power, whom they feared above all others, should learn of the existence of the plans.

The Colonel smiled to himself.

"Little good," he mused, "it would do them to learn of the existence of the plans, unless they were to gain possession of the plans themselves."

He laid his hand lovingly upon the papers scattered over his desk, as a father might lay his hand upon

the head of a favourite child. He counted the designs. There should be six in all; four complete, one half complete, and one merely drawn in outline. He looked a little anxious, then he counted them over again; one of the completed designs was absent.

He went towards the mantelpiece. There stood upon the mantelpiece a particularly handsome brass-faced clock. Behind the clock the Colonel fumbled with his fingers, for in a little secret cupboard, of which even his faithful servant McAron—one who, like himself, had England's greatness close at heart—was unaware, he kept his precious plans. It was not safe to walk with them about his person more often than was necessary. Some accident might happen to him, then woe betide the fate of those designs, which he felt were a sacred trust committed by his country to his care!

He kept the plans in the cupboard built into the clock, which was a hiding-place of his own devising. He heaved a sigh of relief. The missing plan was safe within its secret lodging.

On the mantelpiece, beside the clock, there was a photograph of the Ashleigh Scout Patrol. The Colonel took it up and looked at it. "England's future defenders!" he murmured to himself.

"They're a grand little Patrol. It is the duty of us elder men," he soliloquized, "to teach those to whom, in the future, the country will be looking to use their intelligence, the resources which are at their disposal. Peter—Peter, he's the boy!" His eyes were fixed on the central figure of the group, the Leader, who stood proudly holding the flag on which a dazzling "Panther" had been depicted in black paint. "England will be proud of you some day, she will place the knottiest problems in your hands; there was

never such a boy as you for unravelling mysteries—Peter Phillips ! "

" Right about turn, left wheel ! "

Still the Colonel did not look out through the window, still the plans lay scattered on the table. The Colonel stood musing over the photograph of the Scouts.

" Left about turn, right wheel ! Halt ! " No one could have missed that " halt ! "

The Colonel heard it. He started.

" Right about turn, left wheel ! " Who could be giving such extraordinary directions, surely not the " Panthers " whom he had instructed with such care ? He turned, and there, facing him in the drive, stood six extraordinary little figures attired in brown " gym " tunics, and wearing yellow sashes knotted across their shoulders.

The Colonel threw the window open.

" Who are you, and whatever are you doing here ? " he asked.

In a moment the Leader of the Patrol had stepped forward and saluted.

" Bless my soul," the Colonel cried, " it's little Aggie Phillips ! "

" Yes, it's me," was Aggie's prompt reply, " and this is my Patrol." She waved towards the girls who had lined up behind her, waved with the stick from which the red sash floated. " We're the Secret Service Patrol, but you're not to tell the boys," she added quickly, " because they think girls can't ' scout,' and we mean to prove to them that they can. You offered a reward of five pounds to the Ashleigh Patrol if it was able to find the burglars ? You didn't say whether that Patrol was to be of boys or girls. We are the Ashleigh Patrol—the Ashleigh

Patrol of Girls. We call ourselves the 'Spouts,' and we've come to search for clues which may lead to the discovery of the whereabouts of the burglars who so wickedly entered your house, and made off with your property last night."

The Colonel was immensely entertained. He himself conducted the Patrol to the drawing-room. Its Leader walked in front. She held her head high; and the hand which was not occupied by the staff was stuck through the belt which fastened down her tunic.

In obedience to Aggie's command, the others had followed " at ease."

" You really are an enterprising little crew," the Colonel laughed.

" Patrol," corrected Aggie sharply.

" Patrol, I should have said," apologized the Colonel.

" And if we find the burglars, we shall really win the prize ? " she asked. " You will tell the boys that girls can ' scout ' ? "

" Assuredly, if you win your laurels," answered the Colonel.

" So this is the room in which the burglary took place ? " Aggie scanned the room, ceiling, walls and floor.

" Good gracious, F.F. ! " she suddenly exclaimed, " whatever are you doing there ? " Phyllis was lying prostrate underneath the piano.

" I'm looking for footprints," she said.

" Footprints underneath the piano," Aggie scoffed, " as if anybody could have walked underneath a piano ! "

" They might have lain down to hide," objected Phyllis, aggrieved that her first attempt at " sign " searching had met with a rebuff.

" But they don't lie on the soles of their feet ! " was her leader's scornful answer.

" Alert—attention ! Pencil and notebook, Corporal ! " she commanded.

Ruth immediately came forward, and from the school satchel she was wearing haversack-fashion on her back she produced the articles for which she had been asked, and she handed them to Aggie, giving as she did so the half-salute.

" Let me see now," said Aggie, and she sucked the end of her pencil thoughtfully, " who was the first person to enter the room this morning ? "

" McAron," said the Colonel.

" Oh ! and it was McAron, I conclude," Aggie added promptly, " who must have left the window unbolted last night. I now wish McAron to be summoned."

" Certainly," the Colonel answered, " I will go and tell McAron myself that you wish to speak to him. Perhaps you would like to interview my whole staff ? Give the order, and I will have them summoned."

The Colonel's staff consisted of a manservant, a gardener called Bryant, and Bryant's wife, who was responsible for the culinary department. Both Bryant and Mrs. Bryant lived in the Colonel's house. In addition to these three, the Colonel employed a coachman, Williams, and a " garden help " to assist Bryant in his work, for Bryant was often " rheumaticky " about the legs. Bryant was responsible for the engaging of the " garden help." The post at the moment was vacant.

The Colonel had moved towards the door, but Aggie had run after him.

" It's only McAron that I want to see," she said.

"Don't trouble to fetch him yourself, please," she added. "We'll ring the bell. Number 4, tin-tinnabulate!"

"I will tell him." The Colonel stretched out his hand to turn the knob, but before he was able to leave the room McAron had arrived in answer to B's summons.

No sooner had the servant crossed the threshold than Aggie began to hurl questions at him.

"You are McAron?" she began. "You've been in Colonel Norton's service, how long?"

The man stared in amazement. As if Miss Aggie didn't know that he was McAron, that he had been nearly all his life in the Colonel's service! The Colonel had no more devoted servant than McAron. Why, when his master was in the house, he was never out of it! It was only when the Colonel was in Rexford for the day, that he went to take tea with his cronie—Widow Gale of Chimney House.

Because he did not answer for a moment, Aggie tapped him on the arm with the garden stick she carried.

"Twenty years, Miss, twenty years," he stammered. And he looked helplessly from Aggie to her companions. From whence had this extraordinary little band appeared? The girl who was apparently acting as their leader, was, without a doubt, Miss Agnes Phillips. Why, he knew her as well as her brother Peter, whom he drilled, for it was McAron who conducted the Scout Drill which the Colonel had organized in Ashleigh.

"Twenty years." I must make a note of that," said Aggie, and she wrote down the information in her formidable notebook. Then she turned to her fellow Scouts.

"He says he has been in the Colonel's service for twenty years."

"Are you quite honest and trustworthy?" she asked next.

This time, McAron smiled openly.

"I think so," he replied.

"He thinks he's honest and trustworthy," Aggie entered in her book.

"You may be honest and trustworthy," she allowed, "but you're certainly careless. Did you not leave the drawing-room window unbolted last night?"

"Leave the drawing-room window unbolted?" McAron repeated. "Well, as there haven't been any bolts in that window since I came to this house, I don't see how I could have done otherwise."

"But the Colonel said——" began Aggie.

"Really, young lady," the Colonel felt it was now time for him to interpose, "if I recollect correctly, I haven't volunteered an opinion on the subject. It's you who have done all the talking. I haven't had a chance to get a word in edgeways."

"But you did say," insisted Aggie, "that the window wasn't bolted in the morning?"

"Well," said the Colonel, "hasn't McAron just told you that there weren't any bolts on that window at all?"

"It's rather funny," said Aggie. "Never mind though," she added cheerily, "I shall probably find out everything I want to know in time. I've heaps more questions to ask you now." She was still addressing the Colonel.

"Oh, look here!" said the Colonel, turning away to write a letter at the bureau which stood at the further end of the room, "you'd better put those questions to McAron, for he was the last person to see

the cups. By the way, McAron, I should have explained to you before that these are the 'Spouts'—the Girl Scout Patrol; their leader and organizer is Miss Agnes Phillips."

McAron stood erect. He saluted Aggie, and Aggie, in her turn, saluted McAron.

"We're a Secret Service Patrol, so you mustn't tell the boys," she announced. "We're going to find those cups," she added, "and I believe," now she was facing McAron, notebook in hand, "that you can probably give me a little information which may lead to their discovery."

## CHAPTER V

### THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

Aggie had worried McAron with questions, until, as he had afterwards complained, she had nearly turned his hair white. She had driven him into a corner, and here, surrounded by her Scouts, she had conducted the inquiry.

The Colonel, as though the affair was no concern of his, continued writing his letter.

"I think you have given very poor evidence," she announced, when at length she closed her notebook with a snap. "You keep contradicting yourself. First, you're quite sure 'they' came in through the window, and then, when I go and look at the window and find there isn't a scratch on the paint, nor any sign of a footprint on the flower-bed beneath, you say 'he' must have entered by the front door; you even remember having heard the door bang in the night!"

Very thoroughly had Aggie investigated the

window; she had even clambered out to search the flower-bed, which lay beneath it, for broken flowers or footprints. The only broken flowers she could find were the snapdragons which she herself had spoiled; and the only footprints, those she herself had made, and those which McAron had made when, eventually, he had been obliged to go to her rescue, for, although it had been easy enough to get out through the window, it had been quite another matter to climb back into the room again. So McAron had himself sprung out, and had hoisted up, with scant ceremony, the Leader of the " Spouts."

" It's really most perplexing ! " Aggie sighed. " Not a sign of a footprint, nor a flower broken anywhere. I'm really beginning to think they must have come in through the front door after all."

" I suppose they did come in by a window or a door ? " Phyllis pondered wisely.

" Do you imagine they came down the chimney ? " Aggie snapped. " Colonel," Aggie walked over to the bureau, " tell me honestly now, what you yourself think of the whole affair ? "

" My dear young lady," said the Colonel, " how can *I* throw any light upon the subject ? If you want to know anything," he repeated, " ask McAron. This is all I can tell you," he continued, as though he were giving a great piece of information, " they didn't come in through the front door, for McAron bolted and barred the front door himself, and as he had bolted and barred it, so he found it in the morning."

" But," Aggie nearly screamed, " McAron thought he heard it slam in the night ! He has just said so this minute."

" Did he," said the Colonel, " did he now ? Look here, I expect you young people would like some tea ?

I'll go down and see what cakes Mrs. Bryant has got stored away in that cupboard of hers."

The "Spouts" a moment or two later heard the Colonel tramping down the passage which led towards the kitchen.

Aggie had turned her back upon McAron. She meant to ignore totally one whose information was so worthless.

"It's really very perplexing," she said again. "Obviously, they didn't come in through this window, or there would have been scratching on the paint, footmarks on the flower-bed. They didn't come in through the front door, because it was found bolted and barred in the morning as it had been overnight." She wrinkled up her forehead. Then suddenly she waved the staff which she had never ceased to carry. "I have it, I have it!" she exclaimed, "they came in through the library. The library leads into the garden by means of a French window. A French window is the easiest to open."

"If they came in through the library," said Patty, "I wonder they didn't take the clock?"

"Oh! the cups were more portable for a first attempt," said Aggie. "They'll come back for the clock another time most likely. To the library, to the library!" she shrieked. She left McAron standing by the fire-place. The Colonel was still interviewing Mrs. Bryant in the kitchen.

Across the hall, followed by the Scouts, rushed Aggie towards the library in which the Colonel had been working when the Patrol had made its sudden appearance. The door was closed. Aggie pushed it open.

The window was ajar. At the window, as though he were about to enter the room, stood a dark-

skinned, black-haired, foreign-looking man. He saw Aggie. He turned and fled.

"The burglar! the burglar!" shrieked Aggie. "All of you follow, follow! Double! treble! quadruple!"

Out of the window she rushed with the Patrol at her heels.

"He's making for the woods!" cried Aggie. "Scouts, double quick!" she yelled.

Down the Oak Tree Pathway Aggie flew; the others followed. Only F.F., who was short-breathed, panted and lagged behind.

The man had disappeared among the trees. Aggie rushed on towards the Oak Tree. She had outdistanced the others. And then, quite suddenly, where the path divided right and left, she tripped over the sash which she had wound round her staff, and which, in the flight, had come untied. She recovered herself, and scrambled to her feet; the others had joined her by now. The pursued had disappeared from sight; the pursuers did not know which road to follow, since, on the short-turfed paths, which led, one to the Lonely Farm and one to Rexford, no footprints could be discerned.

"Shall we go right or left!" asked Ruth.

"Let's toss up," suggested Aggie, as she picked up a piece of twig.

"Choose, Corporal!" she commanded. "If you choose the hand in which I hold the twig, we search right, otherwise, we search left."

. . . . . .

The Colonel, disturbed by Aggie's shouting, hurried from the kitchen into the library, only to find the room deserted.

On the desk lay scattered the priceless plans of his Aero-Destroyer. Straight to the desk he walked,

and gathered up the papers. He did not restore them to the clock, he put them into an envelope, sealed it, and tied it up with a piece of red cord. On the following morning he was going into Rexford to show those plans to his solicitor and friend, Mr. Gerald Nephens, who, at the moment, knew nothing of their existence. It was the moment, he considered, when, in strictest confidence, a solicitor should be consulted.

"I wonder what they were screaming about?" he reflected. His mind had travelled back to the sound which had disturbed him in the kitchen. "Why, that handful of girls makes more noise than the whole of the Boy Scouts of England put together. 'Spouts' indeed! Upon my word, if I had the naming of that Patrol, I would call it the 'Girl Shouts'!"

## CHAPTER VI

### A MISLEADING ADVENTURE

It had seemed to Peter that the Oxo class would never end. He was restless and fidgety, and three times his master had been obliged to reprove him for inattention.

"Phillips, if I have to speak to you again," he said irately the third time, "I shall keep you in to do some extra work when the class is finished."

So Peter really had to be more careful, for to be kept in when there was anything so exciting as a burglar hunt on foot would be really too disastrous.

Alas! O'Neill, who sat next to Peter in the Oxo class, was not equally careful. He was a recent recruit to the Patrol; in fact, having passed no tests up to the present, he was still a "tenderfoot." His

mind, too, was absorbed with the burglary, of which he had learnt before the class began from Lambert. He asked a question in an undertone of Stewart, the boy who sat upon his other side, a question which had, unfortunately, no connection with the lesson, and which, by ill chance, reached the master's ears. It was after his patience had been exhausted with Peter's want of diligence.

"Very well, O'Neill," he said, "you can stay in until six o'clock. I will give you a task to do which will keep you better employed than you apparently are at the present moment."

So it was only four boys who followed Peter into the playground when at length they found themselves freed once again from lessons.

"Kee-ook! Kee-ook!" As Peter raced ahead of the others, he pushed his tongue into the side of his mouth and gave the call. He was oblivious of the fact that it was now raining.

In an instant, the four boys had gathered round him: Lambert, his best friend; Danger, who lived at Combe Lodge on Combe Ridge; Stewart, a boy with a round, freckled face and a short crop of bristly brown hair; and Fraser, Stewart's chum. So devoted were these two that Aggie always referred to them as the "Inseparables."

"Quick boys, to Woodbourne now," he said, "to hunt for 'sign'! That'll be our first move in trekking down the burglars. It will be a grand day for us 'Panthers' when we capture the robbers, for capture them I mean to do, so that we may win the reward which will furnish our Club Room."

"Quick march!" said Peter, and at "Scout Pace" the boys hurried off to Woodbourne, their leader marching ahead.

Danger was running with Lambert.

"It's pretty hard luck on the Colonel, losing all his valuables like that," he said. "He really took it splendidly. He didn't seem to agitate at all until we seemed surprised that he wasn't more concerned. It was McAron who seemed the most upset. O'Neill and I met him in the village on our way down to the Oxo class."

"It's pretty horrid for a servant when a burglary happens in a house," said Lambert slowly. "He always has a kind of feeling that people may think that he has had a share in the affair himself."

"As if any one could think a thing like that about old McAron!" Danger said indignantly. "Why, the Colonel tells him nearly everything, and look how keen he is about us Scouts, nearly as keen as the Colonel himself."

They had reached Woodbourne. On the lawn the Leader gathered the Scouts round him.

"First of all," he said, "we will examine the outside of the house. Lambert and I will take the drawing-room side, you others shall explore the ground which leads from the hall door, past the library window, down to the rustic gate. Whoever finds a clue must give the call."

Towards the drawing-room window Peter and Lambert went. On the ground beside the flower-bed Peter knelt. "Found anything?" asked Lambert, for Peter had made a movement of excitement.

"Some broken snapdragons," he answered quickly. He pointed to the poor mutilated flowers.

"It looks certainly as if they had entered by the window," Lambert said. "I—I've found a foot-mark!" he gasped.

"It seems to be a pretty big one," Peter answered.

He was peering over the spot to which Lambert was pointing, the spot on which McAron had stood to hoist Aggie through the window.

"Here's a second print!" said Peter quickly. "Not so big as the other, but fairly 'hefty' all the same."

"Oh! and look here," cried Lambert, "see how the paint is scratched?"

"Kee-ook! Kee-ook!" Peter raised the call. As he raised it, there came ringing from the lawn outside the library, "Kee-ook! Kee-ook!"

"They've found something too!" he cried. He did not wait for the Patrol to answer his summons, but dashed across the lawn.

"Stay where you are!" he commanded. "Stay where you are! What is it? What is it? I've found no end of 'sign,' and unless I'm very much mistaken, the burglars will soon be in our hands."

"Burglars!" Danger gasped. "I should think it *was* a case of burglars. There must have been half a dozen of them, to say the least of it." And he conducted his leader from the library window to the rustic gate, pointing, as he did so, to the medley of footsteps which were still discernible, despite the fact of the recent heavy rain which had fallen since they were imprinted.

Peter took up the trail, the Scouts followed at his heels. The prints he had recognized to be those of people in flight.

Through the rustic gate they tracked into the woods.

"It's the burglars right enough," he said. "Hullo! here's a clear print." And Peter stooped to examine a mound of soft earth on which the large print of a man's foot was plainly visible. Over this

mound, a little earlier in the afternoon, the man pursued by the girls had run.

Save in this one instance, the boys could glean little information as to the nature of their quarry, since the ground along which they were tracking was very hard indeed, the rain having failed to penetrate the thick branches.

Where the path bent, Peter paused to examine it more closely. Again the one footprint, seemingly larger than the rest, stood out.

"I gather from this," Peter said, "they have a leader. Those who assist him are most likely only tools. It is this leader we must find. I can see everything quite plainly," he announced. "The leader, and one other, entered by the drawing-room, collared all they could of worth, and then went across to the library, outside whose window the remainder of the gang were waiting for further instructions. They meant to help themselves from that room too."

"The clock?" suggested Lambert quickly.

"I have no doubt," said Peter, "that they were after the Colonel's presentation clock. They must have been disturbed, however, perhaps by some movement in the Colonel's room, which is overhead. At all events, the lot of them made off as quickly as they could, through the rustic gate into the woods. Somewhere in these woods, I prophesy, they are in hiding at this moment."

Peter had walked on again. "These tracks," he said, "should lead us right up to the robber's lair."

Having rounded the bend, the Oak Tree came into sight. By the Oak Tree Peter stopped abruptly. Neither on the path which led right nor on that which led left could he discern a single footmark. To all intents and purposes the prints had ceased to exist.

Into the last mark he could find, Peter drove his staff, while he paused to consider the best manner in which to continue the search which had been so abruptly checked.

. . . . .

The girls had taken neither of the paths leading from the Oak Tree. Before Ruth had had time to choose, Patty had gasped, "Voices!" All had listened intently, while the voices drew nearer and nearer.

"Hide," whispered Aggie desperately, "hide. Don't you know who it is? It's the 'Panthers'—Peter's Patrol. I heard Peter's voice, I can hear Henry's now. There isn't a moment to lose. They'll be on us in a second. They'll find out all about our Patrol, all our beautiful schemes will be laid bare."

Aggie plunged into the undergrowth, followed by the "Spouts." They bent down to hide themselves among the thick bushes which grew beside the track along which the boys were advancing. Nearer and nearer drew the "Panthers."

"Lie down!" said Aggie, scarcely daring to breathe. "Lie down flat!"

Only just in time did they lie down, for past them the boys filed, and underneath that very Oak Tree, by which the girls had been standing a moment or two before, the boys paused.

Phyllis moved. She had lain down among some leaves. The leaves crackled.

Aggie frowned. B[illegible] nudged the offender with her elbow.

"What was that?" Stewart stood erect and listened.

"Don't think it could have been anything," Peter said. "The rain pattering on the trees most likely.

Do you think they have gone to the right or to the left ? "

" Shouldn't care to say," said Lambert.

" Well, we'll have to split," said Peter, " half to the left, and half to the right."

" Perhaps they have burrowed ? " Danger volunteered. He pointed to where the unfortunate girls lay hiding.

" Well—" said Peter, doubtfully, " I think it is pretty improbable, but we won't risk anything. So you, Number 3, can burrow since you have suggested it yourself. Number 2 and I will take the left path, Number 4 and Number 5 the right."

Number 2 was Lambert, Peter's friend and Corporal, Number 4 and Number 5 were the Inseparables.

Aggie had heard every word. Danger was to scour the undergrowth in which she and the " Spouts " were hiding. They would be discovered ! Already Peter and Lambert had gone to the left, and Stewart and Fraser to the right. Already Danger was pushing his way through those very bushes through which the girls, a little earlier, had forced a passage.

On Aggie's right there lay a ditch. If only she and the " Spouts " could reach that ditch ! for there they would be more securely hidden. Aggie began to drag herself along the ground. The others followed. If only they might reach the ditch before Danger should pass by !

The grasses through which they crawled on all fours shook and quivered.

They were behind the Oak Tree. They could catch a glimpse of Danger. Aggie saw that it would be impossible to reach the ditch without his catching sight of them.

Danger came nearer; then he bent down to examine what he thought might prove to be a trail.

Aggie sprang on to her feet. She crept behind the Oak Tree.

"Form behind!" she whispered. Ruth caught the whisper.

"Put your arms about my waist," she said. And Ruth realized the purport of the order. In a closely-packed queue, the "Spouts" sheltered behind the Oak Tree.

Still Danger came nearer. Round and round that Oak Tree they dodged him, moving as one Once it seemed he must have heard them "circling," for he looked up suddenly; but he could see no one.

Then, his eye was attracted by some broken grass. It was crushed down as though some heavy weights had lain upon it.

"Hullo, hullo!" he muttered to himself. "What's this?"

Aggie trembled; for one moment she thought that they had been discovered. Then she noticed that Danger's eyes were fixed upon the ground. He was making for the place where she and the "Spouts" had lain so recently. Round they moved till they were facing Danger, but since the Tree lay between them, he could not see the queue.

Danger stooped to examine the patch. He examined it from every point of view. Finally he lay down full length on the ground; he rested his head upon his hands, and kicked the Oak Tree, towards which his back was turned, with his heels.

Aggie peeped. Danger was engrossed in making a sketch of the impressions on the grass.

Aggie drew her notebook from her pocket and tore out a slip of paper On this paper she wrote a

message. Her hands were trembling, not from fear of detection but with excitement, for a daring plan had taken possession of her brain.

"DIRECTIONS FOR THE CAPTURE OF DANGER"

she wrote, as though she were making out the recipe for a roly-poly pudding.

"These directions to be followed to the letter. Number 1 to go right, and bind his eyes with my red sash; Number 2 and Number 3 to go right and left, respectively, each to secure a hand. Number 4 to take the cord from her neck, and to bind his hands together. Number 5 to sit on his back, and Number 6 upon his heels. All to work at once, and to start when I raise my staff above my head.

"Signed { A.P. / Number 1."

Aggie had untied the red silk sash which she had wound about her stick. The paper of directions had reached Phyllis.

Danger was still absorbed in the drawing he was making. Once he whistled to himself.

Aggie raised her staff. Noiselessly she let it fall to the ground. The others followed suit. It was necessary that they should have free hands.

Aggie tiptoed forward. She paused to give the others time to come out from their hiding-place. Then, in an instant she had tied the sash round Danger's eyes. He struggled, tried to tear at the bandage with his hands. His hands were secured. He attempted to kick out with his feet; a heavy weight plumped down upon them. He could not rise; some one was sitting on his back. One more desperate effort he made with his feet. As he did

so, Phyllis, off her guard, opened her mouth intending to cry out, for she was suffering grievously; but before she had time to do so Aggie's hand was over that mouth, and Patty pushed her with her elbow so violently that Phyllis lost her balance and tumbled to the ground.

Danger, relieved of the weight, could kick out freely with his feet. Not for long though, for as B♯ had taken the cord from her neck to bind Danger's hands, so Patty whipped off her cord to bind his feet together.

"Kee-ook, kee-ook!" he called out helplessly. But alas! the "Panthers" were far away, too far away to hear the cry of their comrade in distress.

Stealthily the girls, led by Aggie, crept back to the Tree. They gathered up their staves. Through the undergrowth they made a circuitous route, joining the main track some way below the branch paths not very far distant from the Colonel's house.

## CHAPTER VII

### "HERR-MONSIEUR"

It was not until they reached the main track that Phyllis flagged. She was feeling very sore and bruised, for Danger had kicked very hard indeed.

"Poor little Buffet!" Aggie said, as Phyllis, half in tears, confided her woes to the autocratic leader. "Buffet wants her tuffet," she announced. "Well, perhaps we might sit down for a moment. I don't know what the time is, but we'll risk it not being late."

Aggie, though she would not have owned to it for worlds, was really rather tired herself.

They sat down on a fallen tree trunk. Because there was not room for all of them upon the tree trunk Joan and Patty curled themselves at Aggie's feet.

"It seems to have stopped raining now," said B♯. She had caught a glimpse of blue-grey sky through the latticework of leaves above her head.

"Oh, how my feet do ache!" sighed Joan.

"I rather like my feet to ache," said Patty. "It makes me feel I'm a first-class Scout."

"And not a *tenderfoot*," giggled Phyllis.

In a moment every one had turned on Phyllis.

"Really, F.F.," said Aggie rather crossly, "this isn't a time for joking. It's jolly knowing exactly who's burgled Woodbourne," she continued.

"It's splendid there being three people," Ruth exclaimed. "It will be so easy to track a man, a woman and a baby."

"Especially when we know they're in hiding in these woods," interposed B♯. "Daddy says these woods are one of the best hiding-grounds for fugitives."

"Hullo!" said Aggie sharply, "I fancied that I heard something."

Aggie was quite right, she had heard something.

Round the bend which hid the Oak Tree from sight two men came walking. The one had an oval-shaped face, dark eyebrows, and dark hair. His cheeks were rather thin, and fell in at the jaws, which gave him a cadaverous expression. His comrade though was fair-haired and blue-eyed, and his face was florid. They were dressed alike in suits of dark brown tweed. The florid-faced one carried a stick hooked on to his arm. Both men were of medium height, and were clean shaven.

"Strangers in the wood!" said Aggie. "H'm, that's funny!" There was very little to bring

strangers to Rexford or to Ashleigh, or to take them, above all else, into the Bourne Woods.

"Anyway," she said, "perhaps one of them has what we haven't got, a watch? I'll see if I can find out what the time is."

Aggie sprang on to her feet. She approached the man with the cadaverous-looking face.

"I wonder," she said politely, "if you would mind telling me what time it is?"

"Most certainly," he answered. And as he spoke, Aggie detected what she thought to be a foreign accent in his speech. "It is six o'clock," he said.

"Six o'clock!" cried Aggie. "Oh! we shall be late for tea, or rather," she added, with that elusive smile which quite redeemed her face from plainness, and brought many victims to her feet, "we are already very late."

"Come, you others," and she beckoned to the "Spouts" still gathered round the tree trunk, "it is time that we were getting home."

But before they had joined her, the stranger had begun to speak again; he was soliciting a favour on his own behalf. He was requesting Aggie to direct him to the village.

"We have been wandering in the woods and have lost our way," he explained. "I am quite enraptured," he continued, "with this quiet little place. For such a place we have been searching, since I have undertaken some important work which needs my undisturbed attention, and my friend has to accomplish a rest cure."

"To accomplish a rescue of what?" said Aggie full of interest.

For a moment the foreigner looked disconcerted, then he smiled upon Aggie.

"Mademoiselle must forgive my English pronunciation," he apologized. "It was 'rest cure' I said, not 'rescue.'"

"Oh, you're French!" cried Aggie with delight. "Till you said 'Mademoiselle' I thought you were a German." She held her head a little higher: she felt pleased at being addressed as "Mademoiselle."

"Mademoiselle has great discernment, for the blood of the two countries courses through my veins. My mother was French and my father was German." The explanation was made somewhat evasively.

"What about your friend?" asked Aggie.

"My friend is a Spaniard," he replied. "He speaks only Spanish."

"Oh! you must bring him to see my father," Aggie cried. "He speaks Spanish like a native."

"I should like to do so," the cadaverous one replied, "for I hope to spend some time in this delightful spot. Perhaps Mademoiselle would be gracious enough to tell me of some place where I could find accommodation?" and he clicked his heels together and bowed low to Aggie.

And Aggie, recalling her leadership of the "Spouts," gave him the full salute.

"You might get taken in——" she began.

"But, Mademoiselle, I have no wish myself to be deceived!"

"Oh! you're as bad as F.F.!" Aggie cried aghast. "F.F.'s the fat one sitting on the tree," and she pointed to the little group of girls who were still gathered on the ground. "She's always making stupid puns."

The stranger had evidently taken this to be an introduction, for he was now bowing profoundly to

Phyllis, who only sat and giggled ostentatiously and buried her face in her yellow dancing scarf.

"What I should have said," Aggie was explaining, "was that you could probably get lodgings at Chimney House. Widow Gale lives at Chimney House. She is a widow, because her husband's dead."

"Really!" said her new acquaintance very solemnly. "But she must indeed be *désolée!*"

"You'd love Chimney House, I am sure," continued Aggie, chatting quickly all the time. "It's fearfully old. It wasn't always a farmhouse as it is at present. It was once owned by a judge. This judge had condemned an architect to death, but the architect begged very hard indeed for a reprieve. 'Look here,' the judge said"—Aggie, when she told a story, invariably told it in the most delightfully grandiose-colloquial manner—"'if you'll build me a chimney whose like is not to be found throughout the length and breadth of England, I'll let you off this time.' So the architect built this judge a chimney unlike any chimney any one had seen. It's all squiggles, and curls, and thingmyjigs," said Aggie, trying to demonstrate the design of that chimney with her finger. "But no matter, you'll see it for yourself if you go and lodge with Widow Gale, because it's there still; that's why it's called Chimney House. Mrs. Gale will let you have the parlour most likely, and the room that's overhead. The parlour's got such a jolly window. It's low enough for one to jump in and out of it quite easily. Even F.F. managed it one day, so you see what a simple feat it must be. Widow Gale has a nephew Thomas living with her, and a niece, and the niece does the housework. They give you honey and currant buns for tea on Sundays."

"Mademoiselle, but I adore honey! It sounds perfection. Jumping in and out through open windows is a most delightful accomplishment; I should be happy to acquire it. If this Madame Gale will accept myself and my friend as her guests, we shall be greatly honoured. Will Mademoiselle grant me yet another favour," the stranger continued, "will she direct me to the residence of this desolate widow?"

Aggie, at the moment when she had begun to tell the story of Chimney House, had resumed her walk along the main track. Beside her walked the Franco-German and his silent friend. The others straggled behind. Only when they reached the outskirts of the wood did she take the slightest notice of them.

"You can all go home now, except Ruthie," she announced. "I am going to arrange for—for——" she hesitated, "this Herr, this Monsieur to lodge with Widow Gale. In 'rec' time to-morrow I will tell you all about our future plans. Mum's the word, remember!" and she put her finger to her lips. "You're not to tell a soul about the burglars. We're busy over a burglar hunt," she turned to the Franco-German as she spoke. "We're the 'Spouts,'" she added proudly, "or in other words, the Ashleigh Secret Service Patrol of Girl Scouts. The boys are burglar hunting too, but we know more about these burglars than they do. You must promise," she adjured him, "promise faithfully not to tell a soul of what I am going to tell you."

"Mademoiselle's wishes are commands," the Franco-German answered.

"Well!" Aggie continued confidentially, "we've actually seen one of them, the most important one,

for the other two, we have decided, are merely decoys, for you see they're only a woman and a baby. The wretch who raided Colonel Norton's house," Aggie was speaking viciously, " has a huge black moustache and a lot of thick black hair." The Franco-German, as though quite unconcernedly, crushed his hat a little more closely on his head. " I think we'll find him all right," said Aggie, with an impetuous shake of her shoulders.

" Perhaps Mademoiselle will permit me to help her to search ? " Again the stranger bowed.

" You'll really help us," Aggie cried, " help us to find the burglar, and to dish the boys ? Ruthie," Aggie turned to Ruth, who alone of the Scouts remained, the others having filtered away as their leader had commanded; " he will help us," she tugged at the Franco-German's coat, " to find the man who entered the Colonel's house last night ! He will help us to trace the stolen property, to win the reward because," she had turned to her new friend, " Colonel Norton has offered a five-pound reward to the Patrol who will give correct information regarding the whereabouts of the offenders, and the Girl ' Spouts,' quite on the Q.T. you understand, are competing against the boys."

" Would it not be well," the stranger hesitated, " first of all to search the . . . house of this Colonel . . . Colonel Newton ? "

" Norton," corrected Ruth.

" We've searched his house already. It was while we were searching his house," Aggie continued, " only you truly mustn't tell a soul, that we saw the robber's face. He was peering in through the library window. I think he was after the clock."

"Is there a clock then, of great value in the library?" inquired the stranger.

"I don't think very much of it myself," owned Aggie. "Just lately though the Colonel seems to have set great store by it. He got quite annoyed with me one day when I wanted to open the little cupboard at the back to see the works because the clock had stopped."

"It does not go?" the stranger said.

"Oh, it'll go soon enough I think," Aggie answered smartly, "go in a way the Colonel won't be pleased at, because he said once he'd rather anybody took all his things put together than the clock!

"Directly he saw me," Aggie had returned to the story of the black-haired burglar, "he ran away as hard as he could through the woods, to join his wife and baby I suppose. We lost sight of him at the branch paths and did not know whether he had gone right or left. I failed to-day, but I'll find him yet," announced Aggie firmly, "for he's in hiding in the woods. To-morrow, you and I and the others will search the woods together."

"I suppose," Ruth interposed, "you and your friend didn't see anything of the man of whom we're speaking?"

"To the left, Mademoiselle? Now I come to think of it, to the left, yes. I saw a man running as swiftly as a hare to the left."

"It was him!" cried Aggie, regardless of all grammar. "Oh! I never thought," Aggie was squeezing the Franco-German's arm excitedly, "I never thought a foreigner could be so nice! You're quite a dear!"

"Mademoiselle is too complimentary. All success

to Mademoiselle's undertaking ! " He clicked his heels again and bowed. The stranger's friend clicked his heels and bowed. Ruth clicked her heels and bowed, and last of all, Aggie clicked her heels and saluted.

" All success to *your* undertaking ! " she responded, " Herr-Monsieur."

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FEROCIOUS GANG

" KEE-OOK ! Kee-ook ! Kee-ook ! " wailed Danger plaintively. He had been calling for some while, but there had come no answer to his appeal. Then he had ceased for a little to survey the situation. Lying face downwards, unable to rise, he could do nothing but cry for help.

What was that ? Yes, surely he could hear voices ! His ear, trained to detect the slightest movement, caught the sound of the stealthy tramping of feet along the main path. The Scouts were returning from what must have been a fruitless search, since none knew better than the unfortunate Danger that the direction those burglars had taken had been along neither of the two paths, but through the undergrowth which he had been sent to explore.

" Kee-ook ! Kee-ook ! " he called more loudly than he had called before. " Kee-ook ! Kee-ook ! "

Peter, on the main path followed by the Patrol, paused and listened.

Again the cry rang out.

" Kee-ook ! Kee-ook ! "

Peter gave an answering call. "Kee-ook! Kee-ook!"

Danger heaved a sigh of relief, for he knew that friends were at hand.

"It's Danger!" Peter cried. "Quick march! Right!"

Through the undergrowth Peter walked ahead, the others following. They did not choose their steps with care, and the twigs and fallen leaves crackled as they trod them down. Then they caught sight of Danger lying full length on the ground with a red sash bound about his eyes.

"Good gracious!" Peter cried, "whatever's happened?"

He ran towards Danger, only to discover that in addition to his eyes being bound, his hands were fettered and his feet were tied together. In an instant he had torn off the sash—Aggie's new red sash! Stewart had cut the cord which bound the prisoner's hands. Fraser and Lambert had pulled poor Danger on to his feet, for he was so sore and stiff that he could only rise with difficulty.

"I say, who's done it—what's happened?" Peter gasped.

"Who's done it—what's happened?" Danger was fighting for his breath. "A gang of them did it!" he gasped, "a ferocious gang! It turned out after all that they were in hiding in the undergrowth."

"But how did you get tethered to the ground?"

"Who bound your eyes?"

"Who tied your hands?"

"How many of them were there?"

"Were they all men?"

"Would you recognize them again if you were to meet them anywhere?"

The boys were pelting Danger with questions.

"Recognize them?" Danger said aggrievedly. "How could I recognize them when I never saw them?"

"Never saw them!" Lambert cried.

"No, never saw them," repeated Danger, "nor heard them either, for not one of them spoke a word; but I felt them right enough," he added. "I'm not likely to forget the twenty-stone weight that plumped down on my heels!"

"But why didn't you see them?" insisted Peter.

"I didn't see them," Danger said, "because I was lying flat downwards making a drawing of the impressions which I had come across in a patch of broken grass. Whilst I was lying there, making my sketch, the great skulking cowards, who must have been hiding somewhere near and watching all my movements, came and attacked me from behind. One bandaged my eyes; two seized my right hand, two seized my left, and a sixth fastened them together. Half a dozen pinned me to the ground; the twenty-stone weight sat down on my heels. What fellow had a chance of seeing them, I ask you? What fellow had a chance against such a gang of powerful ruffians?"

"They must have been the burglars," Fraser said.

"Oh! they were the burglars right enough," Danger answered. He was enjoying his position as hero of the hour.

"If only we could have caught them! I suppose we'll have to turn in now?" Peter sighed regretfully. "It must be seven o'clock, and I've a fair amount of prep. which I must get through before our meeting in the Club Room. McAron's going to yarn with us at half-past eight. They're far away from here by

now most likely." His thoughts had reverted to the burglars. "I shouldn't wonder if they were hiding somewhere by the Lonely Farm."

"Or may be," Lambert said, "in some of those old huts we discovered on the Rexford side? These woods are chock full of deserted huts overgrown now by the bushes; woodcutters used to live in them once upon a time I believe."

"We'll have another search to-morrow," Peter said. "I wish our school was like my sister Aggie's; they don't have to work in the afternoons."

Peter confiscated the sash which he had crumpled up. Aggie's beautiful silk sash! and he crushed it into his pocket. He marched ahead of the Patrol, taking the same devious route as the girls had taken, and joining the inward path just where they had joined it above the Colonel's house. On the outskirts of the wood they disbanded as the "Spouts" had done.

"Now for Greek, Latin, Algy!" Peter made a face as he spoke. Then he began to whistle. When there's anything disagreeable to be done a Scout must whistle; and lessons to be done were very disagreeable things indeed!

Peter went straight into the White House, and up the stairs to the schoolroom which he shared with Aggie. He found that Aggie had already had her supper. She was curled up in the arm-chair, deep in a Spanish grammar.

"Garden—*jardin*," she murmured to herself. "I shan't forget that, because it's the same as the French. '*Amigo*—friend,'" she repeated, parrot-like, several times. She turned the leaves over until she found the verbs. "*Ud estaba*," she spelt out very slowly, "*Ud estaba* means 'you were.' I shall

remember that, because it sounds like stable." Then to her joy she found a sentence which comprised all the words she had been learning. And this sentence, "Your friend was in the garden—you were in the house," she determined to commit to memory so that she might say it to the poor Spaniard who could not speak a word of anything save Spanish.

She had run straight up when she had come indoors to change her frock, and then she had come down to help Nannie lay the table, for Aggie had remembered that Scouts must always give a helping hand. She looked up languidly as Peter entered.

"Hullo!" she said. "What luck? Found the burglars by any chance?" She spoke as though she herself had never stirred from the house throughout the afternoon.

"Luck!" and Peter cut himself a chunk of bread and sat down at the table. "Well, we've found 'sign' at least, if we've found nothing else. It's a ferocious gang that's done it!"

"That's done the burglary, I suppose?" she said, and she yawned as though she were rather weary of the subject.

"We're on the track of them," he continued, "the dead-certain track."

"Were there more than three?" asked Aggie a little anxiously. The gang to which Peter referred might be the man, the woman and the baby whom she and the "Spouts" were following up.

"More than three!" said Peter emphatically. "Seven or eight powerful ruffians, to say the least of it!"

"Seven or eight?" echoed Aggie, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

"Get the jam, Aggie," Peter said.

"Get it yourself!" was Aggie's prompt retort "*Amigo*—the friend," she murmured to herself.

Then she laid her book down.

Peter was pouring out his milk. He and Aggie always had a schoolroom supper by themselves. It was laid on the table at seven o'clock and they could come in and take it when they liked.

"I'll get it for you, after all," she said. She unknotted the piece of cord she still wore fastened round her throat.

"My one good action done!" she said to herself happily. She planted the jam dish down in front of Peter, but she did not go back to the arm-chair; instead, she drew up a little three-legged stool, and perched herself upon it.

"I've had my supper," she remarked, "but I'll have a bit of bread and jam to keep you company."

Peter cut her the crusty bit he knew she liked.

"It's blackberry," she informed him as she drew the pot towards her.

She laid an ample spoonful upon her crust. "Just to cheer it up," she explained.

"Have you a Scout meeting to-night?" Aggie asked nonchalantly.

"Yes, in the Club Room at half-past eight."

"Everybody going to turn up?"

"I should think so!" Peter answered promptly.

"Were you all out trekking this afternoon?" she ventured next.

"All except O'Neill," said Peter.

Aggie helped herself to more jam.

"Had you any adventures worth recording? Anybody fall into a pond, like—let me see; wasn't it Danger who fell into a pond last time you were out?"

"It wasn't Danger," Peter answered, "it was Stewart. No one fell into a pond to-day."

"Oh! nothing happened of importance?" said Aggie as she tilted back her chair.

"I told you that we found a lot of 'sign.'"

"Well, I suppose that's important?"

"Important!" Peter got up from his seat to fetch his Greek primer from the shelf. "I should think it was important!"

"I do remember now," said Aggie. She had followed Peter to the bookshelf and laid a detaining hand upon his coat sleeve. "It was Stewart who fell into the pond. It was Danger, wasn't it, who nearly smashed himself up on cycle manœuvres with the 'Hyenas'? Isn't Danger the one who's always getting into trouble?"

"Not more than the others," Peter answered coolly.

Aggie frowned. She was just crazy to find out whether the boys were aware of the catastrophe with which Danger had met; whether Danger had any idea who had bound him, and if possible, to learn incidentally of the whereabouts of that new sash which she was now anxious to recover.

Peter disengaged himself from Aggie's detaining hand and walked towards the door.

"Peter!" she called out after him as he went out with his books tucked underneath his arm, "do you know that Mrs. Gale has lodgers? A German-Frenchman, and a Spaniard who doesn't speak a word of anything but Spanish. I met them in the—out of doors this afternoon," she corrected hastily. "The German-Frenchman's most frightfully nice!"

## CHAPTER IX

### SPOUT OR CHIMNEY-POT ?

"PETER, Peter! aren't you ever going to be ready ?" It was the morning following the inauguration of the "Spouts" and the capture of Danger by the "ferocious gang."

Aggie was standing in the hall, with her satchel, which on occasions had to serve as a haversack as well, strapped on to her back. She was wearing her "gym" tunic, for the last hour of the morning was to be devoted to the gymnasium. The schools which she and Peter attended lay in the same direction.

"Peter, Peter!" she called out.

Then, since he still failed to appear, she dashed up the stairs and, omitting the ceremony of knocking on the door, she bounced into his room.

As she bounced in, he pushed something away hastily into the drawer which he had opened. That something was a red sash.

"If you don't hurry you'll be fearfully late," fumed Aggie.

"Flusterbug!" Peter taunted.

"Crawling Torty!" she drawled derisively.

Her words had the desired effect. Peter turned in an instant. Down the stairs she fled, after her he ran; out through the front door she bolted; still he pursued. Only when they were half-way down the road did they both pause breathless.

"Sorry I called you 'Flusterbug.' If your books are heavy I'll carry them for you."

As Peter spoke, Aggie drooped her head.

"Sorry I called you 'Crawling Torty,'" she

apologized. "Oh! you've got a hole in your stocking. Leave it out when you get home and I'll mend it."

Simultaneously both turned away so that one could not see what the other was doing. They were unknotting, respectively, the scarf and cord they were wearing round their necks.

Aggie hesitated. "Perhaps I ought not to have untied it," she reflected, "until I have actually mended the hole in that stocking." Conscientiously she re-knotted the cord.

They walked on briskly for some while. Their minds were both engrossed with the same subject, though each was looking at it from a different standpoint.

"Have a good meeting last night?" Aggie asked at length.

"All right," said Peter.

"Everybody present?"

"Everybody."

"Stewart, O'Neill, Lambert, Fraser—Danger?"

"I've told you every one was there," said Peter, just a little crossly. "You seem very interested in our meeting."

"Sisterly interest, that's all," said Aggie, laying stress on the word "sisterly." "Are you going to trek this afternoon?"

"Of course we are."

"Where?" she asked.

"Well, naturally," he answered, "we should go straight to where we found——"

"Found whom?" asked Aggie quickly.

"Found—found 'sign,'" said Peter smartly.

They had reached the corner where they usually parted.

"Ta-ta!" said Aggie, and she waved to Peter with the satchel he had now restored to her. "Don't forget"—she couldn't resist this thrust—"to give my kind remembrances to Danger!"

She turned into the Willows, the Willows being the name of the day school which she and her friends attended.

The morning opened with a drawing class. Before the advent of the mistress Aggie and her "Spout" friends gathered round a little table.

"We've got to go and look for more 'sign,'" Aggie said. "We have to search for the whereabouts of the robber and his wife and the baby. I have found out what the boys think. The boys think there is a gang, but they are wrong. We'll have a good old explore this afternoon. I am going to ask Herr-Monsieur to come with us. We start directly after lunch."

"But I've a music lesson," B♯ grumbled.

"And grannie's coming to spend the afternoon with us," objected Joan. "Mother said that Phyl and I must stay indoors till five."

"Well, we shall have to divide, that's all," said Aggie. "Ruth, Patty and I will start off with Herr-Monsieur, and you others can do a bit of tracking on your own at five. We'll compare notes at our meeting this evening."

"Oh!" said Joan, "are we going to have a meeting?"

"Isn't it time we had one?" Aggie answered. "I've a most lovely idea," she continued. "I'm going to ask father when I get home this morning if we may have the apple loft for our very own. I shall tell him all about our Patrol as a great, great secret. I want to have the apple loft for the Club Room,

and I'm sure he'll let me; but it'll have to be cleaned out first, and I don't know for certain by what time it will be brushed down. I'll let you know this afternoon if it's all right, and what time our meeting will take place."

"But we shan't be there to hear," Bee piped in.

"Oh, I'll leave a message for you at the rendezvous," said Aggie promptly. By the rendezvous she meant the Oak Tree. "I'll pin it on to the bark, underneath the thickest hanging branch. I'll put the hour at which the meeting is to take place, and if it's to take place in the apple loft I'll add the initials 'A. L.'; and so that you will know it's really me who has left it I'll add the sign of our Patrol."

"But what," said Ruth, "is the sign of our Patrol? The 'Panthers' draw a panther, I know, and the 'Hyenas,' a hyena, but what——?"

"What do we draw? Well, it's pretty obvious, I should think. The 'Spouts' draw a spout gushing with water."

"But I can't draw a spout," said Phyllis.

"Well, I can't do it very nicely either," Aggie owned, as she made two or three unsuccessful attempts on her drawing-paper.

"Isn't it something like this?" Patty said; and on the margin of the local paper, which was lying on the desk, she made a drawing of something which looked equally like a cigar, a swan's neck and a worm.

Aggie came and leant across her shoulder.

"Bottled-Jelly!" she scoffed, pointing to the work of art. "Our modern Bottled-Jelly! Why, what is this?" She was pointing to the "wanted" column. At the head of the "wanted" column this advertisement was printed—

"Wanted immediately at Woodbourne, an under-

gardener. Wages, 18*s.* per week. Apply at above address between the hours of 12 and 2 on Thursday next."

"Why, that is to-day," said Aggie, looking up. "To-day is Thursday."

"That's funny," Joan remarked, "because we met the Colonel driving in the dog-cart to catch the 9.45 train to Rexford. He said he wouldn't be back until the evening. He had a lot of business to transact, which probably meant he was going to see his silly old solicitor. That's what a lot of business means, so Daddy says."

"Bryant will interview the applicants," said Aggie. "Bryant always chooses his own under-gardener."

"Ready for your class, children?" Miss Dean, the drawing mistress, had come into the room. In an instant every girl was in her place.

"Well," said Miss Dean leniently as she stood up by the blackboard, "what shall it be to-day? What would you children like to draw?"

No one answered.

"Aggie Phillips shall choose." Miss Dean nodded to where Aggie sat, a very virtuous Aggie, with her drawing-board and pencil in front of her. She had not to ask Aggie twice. Aggie always knew exactly what she wanted.

"Oh, a spout," she said. "Do let's draw a spout with water gushing from it."

Her companions looked towards her. The remainder of the class stared in astonishment. Why should Aggie Phillips choose to draw a spout?

Miss Dean smiled genially.

"You have made a funny choice," she said, "but since you have chosen it, so shall it be. You will all draw a spout with water gushing from it."

Every head was bent over its drawing-board. Pencils moved up and down; india-rubber frequently came into use. Heads were cocked on one side the better to observe finished productions.

The drawings were collected and handed to Miss Dean. She examined them critically. She laughed, she shook her head.

"A funnier lot of spouts I've never seen!" she said. "I think this spout, though, is the funniest of them all;" and she held out, so that every one could see it, the drawing which Aggie had made.

"Not much like a spout, Aggie dear," she smiled. "More like a chimney throwing up its smoke."

And that was exactly what Aggie's drawing looked like—like a rather beautiful chimney-pot throwing up its smoke!

## CHAPTER X

### "DON QUI"

"GYM" was over—"gym," the last item of the morning's work.

In the lobby, the girls were putting on their shoes and hats preparatory to hurrying home to lunch. Aggie had signalled the "Spouts" to gather round her. Her private rally-sign was to scratch the left side of her nose with her left forefinger, and at the same time to suck the end of her thumb.

"I've found out," she said, as she drew them into a corner by themselves, "that the boys pay a subscription to their Patrol. The subscription that they pay goes towards the rent of their Club Room. We must pay a subscription. So I propose that we pay"

—Aggie paused; Patty looked a little anxious, for Patty had but little money—" twopence each, and that we offer these ' twopences ' to father as rent for the apple loft."

Patty heaved a sigh of relief. She could afford twopence.

Whilst Aggie went on talking, Patty fumbled in her pocket for the money. Then suddenly she gave a cry of consternation.

" I had it in my pocket yesterday. I know I did, because, when I went home to change into my tunic —uniform I mean—I took it out of the drawer and put it in my pocket. I must have dropped it in the woods. It contained all my money—all the money I shall have for a whole month ! Worst of all, there was a half-crown in it that belonged to mother. What shall I, shall I do ? I know," she continued, " I'll go and look for it this minute ! "

" Remember," Aggie cried out after Patty, who was rushing off, " to meet us at three o'clock this afternoon outside Woodbourne."

" We'll go to Herr-Monsieur's now," she continued, as she tucked her arm through Ruth's. " Good-bye, Joan; good-bye, Miss Buffet," and she gave fat Phyl a friendly push which sent her rolling down the steps.

" It isn't Miss Buffet, it's Miss Muffet ! " Phyllis contradicted practically, as she picked herself up again and rubbed her fat and podgy arms.

But Aggie only laughed.

" I hope you'll meet with great adventures when you're tracking on your own," she cried out, " Miss— Miss Buffet ! "

Aggie and Ruth hurried from the Willows to Chimney House. The Willows and Chimney House did not lie very far apart.

Chimney House lay back from the road. It was surrounded by a flower garden from which a gateway led into the fields which sloped up gently to the foot of Combe Ridge. Above the best parlour rose the massive chimney which had given the house its name. Up the broad drive, bordered with rhododendron bushes, Aggie and Ruth walked.

Widow Gale herself opened the door to admit the visitors.

"Why, it's Miss Aggie!" she exclaimed, and she beamed with pleasure as her faded blue eyes rested lovingly upon her favourite's face. "You're as welcome as the flowers in May! I was only saying to Mr. McAron, when he came to take a dish of tea with me on Sunday last, that it was a long time since I had set eyes on you. But there, you're that busy with your school play, I expect, that you haven't time for much besides?"

"I'm pretty busy," Aggie owned.

"Mr. McAron will be glad to hear you're looking well," Widow Gale continued. "He's coming down again this afternoon," she said with conscious pride, "to fetch some nice eggs for the Colonel's breakfast. He always comes on Mondays and Thursdays for the eggs; and when the master is in Rexford he'll stay and have a bite with me and a chat about old times. But there, I expect it's a bite you'll be wanting with all the lessons you've been learning. I've a nice pasty cooking in the oven. You come down with me to get it."

But Aggie was not to be tempted by the appetizing pasty.

"We've come to pay a call," she said. "Is Herr-Monsieur at home?"

"Hare—hare—what?" said Widow Gale, perplexed. "Hares are out of season, lovey."

"I mean your lodger," Aggie interposed.

"Oh, the Count!" said Widow Gale, and she smoothed down her apron as she spoke. "Count Augustus Lorraine and his Austrian friend!" The smart-sounding foreign title came glibly to Widow Gale's tongue.

"Not Austrian, Mrs. Gale," corrected Aggie, "he's a Spaniard. Count Augustus Lorraine," she lingered over the name, "told me his own self his friend was a Spaniard."

"Is that some one who requires me?" From the room to the right, Widow Gale's best parlour, Herr-Monsieur, very smart and trim, came forth.

"Why, it's *chère Mademoiselle!*" he exclaimed. "*Chère Mademoiselle* and her dear friend."

"All the *chairs* are in the parlour," Widow Gale endeavoured to explain.

Back into the room Herr-Monsieur went with Aggie clinging to his arm, while Ruth walked behind.

"Me and Ruthie have come to see you," Aggie chattered on, "about the burglar. We want you to come and look for him this afternoon. We want you to meet us outside Woodbourne, for that's to be our meeting-place, at three o'clock."

Herr-Monsieur would of course be *enchanté* to aid Mademoiselle in any way.

Aggie was looking round the room with interest. It was many months since she had been in Widow Gale's best parlour, she was usually received in the kitchen. Her attention was attracted by the photograph of a baby on the mantelpiece.

"Is this your little boy?" she asked, and she turned round to Herr-Monsieur.

"No, Mademoiselle." Herr-Monsieur shook his head. "I have only a little girl."

"Her name is what?" asked Ruth.

"Babette," Herr-Monsieur said.

"Oh, please tell us all about her!" Aggie cried. She left the photograph on the mantelpiece and ran towards Herr-Monsieur. Again she tucked her arm through his. Ruth was sitting in the window—the window through which one could pass in and out so easily.

"Does she talk a lot?" said Aggie. "And do you love her very dearly?"

"She is a priceless possession," Herr-Monsieur responded. "But you would find her, I fear, rather silent."

"Oh, like your friend Don—Don——" began Aggie. "My Daddy says that nearly every Spaniard is Don something or other. There's the adventurer, about whom someone called Cervantes wrote. Let me see now, his name was—Don Qui—Qui——" She paused, she could not remember the concluding syllable. "Don Qui——" she repeated. Again she stuck. "Oh well, it doesn't matter much!" she said, and she tossed her head. "That's quite enough. For the future," she announced, "I mean to call your friend Don Qui."

And it wasn't until long afterwards that she found out why Ruth had suddenly burst out laughing at this moment, and accused her of being a very rude girl.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE RED-HAIRED GARDENER

When Aggie left Herr-Monsieur's, she suggested to Ruth they had better run a little of the way, for it was getting late and her mother liked her to be in time for lunch.

To reach her own house, she had to pass by Patty's, and as she hurried past the gate she was arrested by a loud whoop. Down the drive Patty came running.

"I was waiting for you," she exclaimed, and her face was wreathed in smiles. "I was waiting to tell you I had found it, and where do you think I found it?" Patty laughed as she spoke. "After I had searched and searched in the woods, I came home to discover that it was in my own room after all. It must have fallen out of my tunic when I went to bed last night."

She held out a dark-green leather purse for inspection.

"I had quite an adventure whilst I was searching in the woods," she continued.

"Anything to do with the burglars?" Aggie asked eagerly.

"I saw," said Patty very impressively, "a strange man with red hair."

Aggie's interest waned. She knew the quarry she was pursuing was of swarthy appearance. She was no longer interested in the story, but Patty meant to tell it.

"I was searching near the Oak Tree," she continued, "when I heard footsteps approaching; the footsteps were coming from the heart of the undergrowth. I bent down that I might be unobserved. The man passed me by. He was of medium height and dressed in working clothes. He turned down the main track, and because I thought it was rather cowardly of me not to do so, I followed him. Can you imagine how surprised I was when I saw him pass through Woodbourne gates?"

Aggie chuckled at what she considered to be the tame conclusion of this story.

"Silly Pat-a-Cake," she laughed. "Most likely he was an applicant for the post of under-gardener. Don't you remember the advertisement we read in the "Local" before our drawing class?"

"I hadn't thought of that," said Patty.

"But it was very funny," she persisted, "that he should have come through the undergrowth and not by the path which leads from Rexford."

"He was picking bluebells most likely," Aggie said.

"Oh, Ag!" Patty answered, "you know quite well that bluebells don't flower in September."

"Now I must be off," said Aggie, "or I shall be very late indeed."

She unstrapped the satchel which she had buckled to the gate and slung it on her back.

"You do love making mysteries out of nothing," she exclaimed.

"Making mysteries out of nothing," Patty repeated. "Oh! do I, Miss Kettle?" she retorted. "I shan't tell her anything about it," she reflected; "but it would be mean of me not to do so. Aggie is my leader, and to my leader I promised loyalty and allegiance."

Aggie had begun to walk swiftly down the road. Patty climbed on to the gate.

"Aggie," she called after her. "Aggie!"

Aggie, hearing Patty's voice, turned back.

"I suppose you'll say it's nothing," she began. She had drawn a folded piece of paper from her pocket. "When I was coming away, I found this lying on the path and I picked it up. Here it is. I give it to you because it may mean something and because you're the Leader of us 'Spouts.'"

. . . . . .

After all, they did not meet at Woodbourne. Ruth called for Aggie, and Ruth and Aggie called for Patty. Aggie was full of the projected Club Room. She had obtained willing permission from her father to use the loft for whatever purposes she wished.

" It's only half-past two," said Aggie, as she looked at the five-shilling Waterbury watch which she had bought with her birthday money. " We told Herr-Monsieur to be outside Woodbourne at three. We shall have to wait for him a long while, I'm afraid."

They turned off the main road into the lane which led up to Woodbourne House. No sooner had they turned into this lane than they espied some one walking ahead of them : a man of medium height with his head bent.

" It's Herr-Monsieur ! " Aggie cried, as she started running to catch him up. " I do believe he's just as keen as we are, else he wouldn't have come, would he, half an hour before time ? "

" Herr-Monsieur—Herr-Monsieur ! " Aggie called at the top of her voice.

He did not seem to hear her, so when she came near enough to do so she prodded him in the back with the garden stick she carried.

Herr-Monsieur turned round quickly. " Why, it's —it's Mademoiselle," he said, and he beamed with pleasure as though the sight of Aggie gave him profound satisfaction.

" You dear darling thing to have come so early," Aggie cried excitedly.

" Numbers 2 and 3," she commanded, " salute." And Ruth and Patty instantly saluted.

" Numbers 2 and 3," she explained, " are my friends Ruth and Patty, with whom you are already acquainted."

"I have the honour, the great honour," said Herr-Monsieur.

They were standing in a little knot outside Woodbourne.

"Now to business," said Aggie, and she proceeded to lead the little party past the Colonel's gate. But Herr-Monsieur did not seem inclined to run at Scout Pace. He loitered and hesitated.

"*Chère Mademoiselle*," he said, and he pointed to where the towers of Woodbourne rose above the trees, "is it not there that the *brave* Colonel lives?"

"Yes, yes," said Aggie. She was impatient at the interruption.

"It is the house which I desire more than any other to visit," he observed, "for I would include some account of it in the great work upon which I am at the moment engaged."

What that great work was Aggie had not yet discovered. She now jumped to the conclusion that Herr-Monsieur must be engaged upon a volume of topography.

"If Mademoiselle would take me in and show it to me," Herr-Monsieur continued, "I should be grateful to Mademoiselle for life. Its venerable master is not at home to-day, I understand."

"How did you know that?" said Aggie, and she turned upon her new acquaintance sharply.

"It was Madame Gale who recounted me this information, she who is so happy in knowing all the great news of the neighbourhood. She told us at breakfast that Monsieur the *brave* Colonel had planned an expedition into Rexford. Mr. McAron is to take tea with Madame Gale this afternoon."

"They're a couple of old cronies," Aggie said, and laughed.

"Perhaps Mademoiselle would tell me," Herr-Monsieur suggested craftily, "at what time the Colonel usually returns when he visits Rexford? I would pay my respects to so great an officer."

But Aggie shook her head.

"He either comes by the three or the four-thirty," she said, with but little interest in the matter.

"I suppose Widow Gale told you also," Aggie chattered on, "that the Colonel was advertising in the *Daily Post* for an under-gardener? There really isn't any need to have a *Daily Post* in Ashleigh so long as Widow Gale lives here."

"No, Mademoiselle," Herr-Monsieur said, "Madame Gale made no mention of the under-garden man."

"Well, let's get on now, we're wasting precious minutes," Aggie fumed.

"But has Mademoiselle forgotten," Herr-Monsieur still persisted, "that I would like to see the house? Indeed," and Herr-Monsieur's eyes brightened quickly, "it is needful I should do so if I am to assist Mademoiselle and her 'Stouts.'"

"Spouts," corrected Aggie.

"He must have seen F.F.," Ruth whispered.

"*Mille pardons, Mademoiselle!* It is needful," he repeated, "that I should see the exact place where this villain forced an entrance. I insist," and Herr-Monsieur looked so determined that Aggie felt a little afraid of him.

"Well, if you must, I suppose you must," she allowed.

She was about to open the gate, but Herr-Monsieur had anticipated her movement.

"Permit me!" he exclaimed, and he pushed the gate wide open.

"Oh! Patty, look, whoever's that?"

No sooner had Aggie passed in through the gate than she had caught sight of a strange face. A gardener whom she had never seen before was trundling a barrow down the drive.

Patty seized hold of Aggie by the arm.

"That's—that's the man!" she said. "That's the one I saw when I was in the woods. You were right after all. He must have been on his way to apply for the vacant post."

"Which apparently he was successful in obtaining," Aggie interposed.

Herr-Monsieur, who had remained to close the gate, now rejoined the trio.

"Perhaps that man," said Herr-Monsieur, as though trying not to miss an opportunity which might throw light upon the mystery, and at the same time pointing to the red-haired gardener, "might be able to give us some information."

"He couldn't possibly," objected Aggie, "he's the new under-gardener."

"And he was only engaged this very afternoon," Patty volunteered.

"Then it would not avail us to question him," said Herr-Monsieur decisively.

They walked on towards the house. The man had turned his barrow and was following in their wake. They had reached the lawn. The gardener had also reached the lawn. He had left his barrow on the pathway and was busily employed in picking leaves out, one by one, from a bed of flowering thyme.

"The cups were stolen," said Herr-Monsieur, "from the drawing-room, I believe. That is the drawing-room, is it not?"

"Oh no!" Aggie answered promptly, "that's the

library, the Colonel's special sanctum, the room in which he always works."

"Oh! then the *brave* Colonel has work to do?"

"He calls it work," said Aggie, "but I don't believe it is. He only draws silly little things on scraps of paper. I know this because I went into the room once when he was working. He was so annoyed with me that I never went again."

"Perhaps," suggested Herr-Monsieur subtly, "he was drawing a boat the like of which has never been floated."

"Now you come to mention it," said Aggie, "it did look rather like a boat. When he saw me looking at his drawings he swept them all away."

"Swept them where?" Herr-Monsieur asked. He watched Aggie closely.

"I'm sure I don't know," she replied.

"This, I conclude, must be the drawing-room window?" Herr-Monsieur had approached the window which Peter had so thoroughly examined.

"Of course, I don't believe for a minute," Aggie was explaining, "they really entered by that window, because there weren't any footprints on the soil or scratches on the paint."

But Herr-Monsieur smiled, for he knew of burglars who left no footprints or scratches on the paint.

"Suppose your 'Spouts' were to enter by the window?" Herr-Monsieur suggested. "Suppose we pretend for the moment that they are the burglars about to steal the cups?"

"And you and I will watch them from here," said Aggie.

Herr-Monsieur had returned now to the lawn. But Herr-Monsieur would not permit this. Aggie must enter through the window with her friends.

" You, Mademoiselle, are so agile," he cajoled.

She determined she would show Ruth and Patty that she really could climb in through the window, for she still felt a little sore that McAron had been obliged to help her on the previous day. She gave a little run. " One—two—three," she counted, and she vaulted right up on to the window-sill. " I've done it this time ! " she cried triumphantly.

She turned round quickly to receive the ovation which she felt sure Herr-Monsieur would shower upon her. But Herr-Monsieur was not watching her. The red-haired gardener was thrusting something into into his hand.

" Attention there ! " Aggie called out loudly. " Attention, Herr-Monsieur ! "

Herr-Monsieur turned immediately. He moved towards Aggie.

" But Mademoiselle scaled that window-sill with perfection ! " he exclaimed.

" You weren't looking," she reprimanded.

" Only for one moment, Mademoiselle. I was speaking to the under-garden man with the red hair."

" He was giving you something," said Aggie firmly.

" I was asking him," Herr-Monsieur continued, " to tell me the name of the flower that grows so profusely in the bed by which he is now standing; lest I should forget it, he wrote it down for me."

" That flower ! " said Aggie. " Why, it's thyme ! I could have told you that if you had asked me. I know its Latin name too," she said proudly. " It's catalogued as ' Perfectus.' "

" Had I but known Mademoiselle was a botanist—" Herr-Monsieur unfolded the paper which he had received from the red-haired gardener.

Aggie, who had now jumped down from the window-sill, came towards Herr-Monsieur. By standing on tiptoe she could peer over his shoulder. He had not realized that she was so close at hand.

"There! I was right," she exclaimed. He started, for she was pointing to the paper he was holding. "It is called 'Perfectus.' He's spelt thyme wrong. How funny! Four, I suppose," she added, "is the catalogue number?"

Upon the paper, which Herr-Monsieur had not desired she should read, were written these words—

"Perfect Time—4."

## CHAPTER XII

### A DISCONCERTING PLAN

"WELL, we've wasted quite enough time!" said Aggie, as she marched down Oak Tree Pathway ahead of the others.

"Ah, Mademoiselle! believe me," said Herr-Monsieur, "we have wasted no time. The valuable information which I have gained will help me greatly in the search!" Because Herr-Monsieur had dropped a little behind, Aggie did not see that he was smiling.

When they reached the branch paths, they paused for a moment.

"Do we go right or left?" asked Ruth.

"Whist!" said Aggie, and she put her finger to her lips. "I have a suspicion. The suspicion entered my head through a paper Patty found this morning, that the robber and his family are in hiding in these very woods, in a hut; and what is more, that the hut in which they are secreted is not so very far distant

from the undergrowth into which we burrowed yesterday."

"Aggie!" Ruth exclaimed.

"Yes," said Aggie, and she nodded her head emphatically, "I've been simply bursting with it all the afternoon, only I didn't mean to tell you till we had reached the Oak Tree. The paper which Patty found I believe to be a plan showing the whereabouts of this hut. It must have been dropped by somebody in flight." And Aggie spread out on her hand a sheet of foreign-looking paper upon which a drawing had been made.

Ruth looked puzzled.

"I don't think that I quite understand," she fretted.

"Oh, but I do," Aggie said. "The bit marked A," she pointed to it with her finger, "is the main track. B and C are the branch paths. And you see that sort of thing that looks like a tree?"

"Why," said Patty quickly, "it must be our Oak Tree, because it stands just where the road branches!"

"Grand, Number 3!" commended Aggie. "Without a doubt it is the Oak Tree."

"D," said Ruth, as keen as Aggie herself now, "you take to be the hidden hut?" Beside the letter D there had been outlined a tiny, low-roofed hut.

"Yes," said Aggie. "And do you notice the curved line that has been drawn from the Oak Tree to the hut? The hut lies through the undergrowth, in the heart of the woods. What I suggest is this," she continued: "that we start from the Oak Tree, and, with the plan in our hands, follow that line exactly until we reach the hut."

"But E, what's E?" said Patty, for there was yet one more corner of the plan, and that corner was

marked with an E. She was craning her neck over the important paper which she herself had found.

"Why, E," said Aggie, "can't you see from its position that E's the Colonel's house, the house which was burgled last Wednesday night by the man who lives in the hidden hut? Herr-Monsieur, don't you think I'm right?" Aggie was appealing to Herr-Monsieur.

"Mademoiselle"—Herr-Monsieur had been standing a little apart from the group; he now joined it—"I think you have deciphered the villain's plan with great intelligence. If you will permit?" and he held out his hand for the paper, which Aggie gave him readily. He examined it closely for a minute. Then he folded it. He did not attempt to restore it to its former owner. "I suggest we make immediate search for that hut," he said.

"So do I," agreed Aggie quickly. "I've brought you to the Oak Tree," she announced; "*you* shall guide us to the hut, for you shall keep the plan, Herr-Monsieur, in case I lose it."

"Look, look!" Herr-Monsieur was pointing with his hand. He had even interrupted Aggie, who had commenced to speak again. "There, to the right, round the corner! There, Mademoiselle!"

"What, what? Who? Who?" cried Aggie all agog.

"A man," screamed Herr-Monsieur, "a man with a dark moustache!"

"It's—it's the burglar!" Aggie cried. "Follow, follow!" she shrieked.

"Follow, follow!" repeated Herr-Monsieur.

The plan was forgotten. Along the path the "Spouts" fled. Only Herr-Monsieur did not move. He waited behind until they were out of sight. Not

one of them had missed him. They were far too busy tracking down an imaginary quarry.

Herr-Monsieur had taken from his letter-case a sheet of unused foreign-looking paper; from his pocket a fountain pen. On this foreign-looking paper he began, with great rapidity, to make a little plan. When he had finished it he surveyed it critically. Then he looked at the plan which he had taken from the leader of the "Spouts." The only difference between these two plans was that in the earlier one the hut D lay to the right of the Oak Tree, whilst in the later sketch the same hut, still marked D, lay to the left. The original drawing he folded and put away inside his letter-case; the second plan he slipped inside his right-hand coat-pocket.

He pulled out his watch. It was half-past three. He heard voices coming nearer. It was the "Spouts" returning. They had failed in their search.

"Why, you've got back before us," Aggie said.

"Yes," Herr-Monsieur answered. "I was left behind. I'm not as active as you young people. I became out of breath, that was why I was obliged to give up the search."

"*He's* pretty active, at all events!" sighed Aggie. "We never caught sight of him. Anyway, though," she said, brightening visibly, "we have the hut to find. Let's start at once in search of the robber's hut."

"Alas! Mademoiselle" (Herr-Monsieur really looked distressed), "I promised my poor lonely friend at home I would not be later back than four o'clock. It is now half-past three. Deeply as I regret it, I must say *au revoir*."

"But it doesn't take half an hour to get to Chimney House."

"Mademoiselle, as I have said before, I am no longer active, and quick walking tires my heart."

"Poor Herr-Monsieur!" Aggie murmured sympathetically. "But do you really mean to tell me it's half-past three already? I have to be home by half-past four. I've to go and see my aunt with mother."

"I hope you will have a successful search," Herr-Monsieur bowed politely.

"Oh! Oh!" Aggie was running after him. "You've got my plan!" she cried. "We can't possibly find the hut without the plan."

"*Naturellement, Mademoiselle.* But I am forgetful." And he drew out of his right-hand coat-pocket the piece of folded paper.

Aggie returned to the others, who were still waiting by the Oak Tree.

"You haven't forgotten," Patty said, "that we're to leave a message on the Tree?"

"Of course I haven't," Aggie said. "Shan't we have a lot to tell the others this evening?" she exclaimed, and she laughed jubilantly as she drew out a notebook and a pencil from her haversack.

Once again she detached a sheet of paper from her notebook.

"Eight o'clock to-night—A. L." she wrote, and above the message she drew the secret sign—the Spout.

"Looks more like a chimney than ever!" she sighed sadly, as she pushed aside the branches and pinned the secret message on to the Tree. "Now for the hut!" she exclaimed, and she unfolded the plan which Herr-Monsieur had taken from his pocket.

"Funny!" she said, and she wrinkled up her brow, "I thought the hut lay on the right of the Oak Tree,

but I find, after all, it lies on the left." She showed the plan to Ruth.

"Yes," Ruth agreed, "it certainly lies on the left."

"I must have been mistaken," Aggie owned.

"Here's written evidence to prove you were," laughed Patty.

"Well, here goes," said Aggie; and holding the plan carefully in one hand, and pushing aside the bushes with the staff she held in the other, she worked her way through the undergrowth, making a bee-line all the while towards the left. And as she made a bee-line towards the left, Herr-Monsieur, who had returned to the Oak Tree the moment the "Spouts" were out of sight, made a bee-line through the undergrowth towards the right.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE BOGUS COLONEL

The church clock struck four.

Simultaneously with the striking of that clock, a bell rang. It was the bell which Mrs. Bryant always insisted on ringing at four o'clock to summon McAron and Bryant in to tea. Since, however, McAron was taking tea that afternoon with Widow Gale, Mrs. Bryant, dispensing the hospitalities, had invited the new under-gardener to take tea in the kitchen. He had seemed chary of accepting her invitation, but Mrs. Bryant, believing him to be diffident, had declined to take a "no." So that when, a few minutes after four o'clock, a man with white hair and a white moustache walked in through the gates of Woodbourne he found the place deserted.

One rather imagined than knew that the old man's hair was white, for his hat was crammed down over his ears. As he walked along with his head bent he gave one the impression that he was looking for a sixpence on the ground. He went straight across the lawn towards the library.

The library window was open. The under-gardener had been watering the flowers which grew beneath it.

He went into the room. He did not hesitate, but went straight towards the mantelpiece upon which stood the clock, which, for the past three days, had always informed one that the time was half-past ten. He examined it critically. It was not such a very wonderful clock after all. Certainly there seemed no reason why the Colonel should value it above all his possessions unless, as Herr-Monsieur suspected, the contents of that clock were not works alone. He tried to move it. It took some force, but at length he pulled it round.

After a careful examination, he discovered the secret cupboard in which, until the previous evening, the papers had been kept. In a moment, so he believed, they would be safely in his hands. He opened that cupboard, however, to find that it was empty. The plans had been removed, but that they had once been kept in that hiding-place he felt assured. He was vexed and disappointed; he determined to search elsewhere.

He went towards the desk. Drawer after drawer he opened. Apparently, however, he did not find that for which he was searching.

He turned and surveyed the room. There was a table in the centre; beyond the table, facing the window, not far distant from the fire-place, stood an ottoman. He went towards the ottoman and opened

it. Save for a few sheets of music lying at the bottom it was barren of contents. Square to the ottoman, opposite the door, stood a tall white cupboard reaching from the ceiling to the floor. Herr-Monsieur opened the cupboard. As the ottoman had been empty, so now was this cupboard. Only a few old rifles had been pushed into one corner, and the Colonel's sword, which had seen some good service, hung suspended from a peg.

Back to the desk the old man went. He did not totter, he was rather lithe and active in his movements Again he began to search the drawers. Still seemingly baffled, his eye was attracted by a letter. He picked it up and read it. The letter, marked in pencil " unanswered," was from a firm of carpenters in Rexford known as Rogers. This man Rogers was writing to the Colonel to know if he had any protégés whom he could recommend, as he had a number of small orders to execute at the moment and was short of hands. He knew that the Colonel was associated with many societies and institutes for the benefit of working men. He would be away from Rexford until Monday morning, but his foreman would see any applicants who called before the hour of 10 a.m. The note concluded with many grateful thanks from Mr. Rogers for the constant work which Colonel Norton was putting in his hands.

The man before the desk took out from a letter-case a sheet of stamped note-paper. He selected a pen and opened the inkstand. Then, as though the idea had suddenly occurred to him, he removed the writing materials to the table in the centre of the room. Before this table he placed a chair, and sat down. He wrote slowly, because he was writing a bold round hand.

"*Thursday afternoon.*" Thus he headed the letter.

"Colonel Norton," he continued to write, "has great pleasure in stating that the bearers of this note, Bates and Wilson by name, are excellent workmen, and have a special knowledge of locks. He trusts that Mr. Rogers will give them employment, and he will be glad if he will see that one or the other of these men be sent to attend to all repairs at Woodbourne.

"Signed { A. FRAWDE, Secretary."

Herr-Monsieur chuckled to himself, and placed the note which he had written in an envelope and slipped it into the pocket of his coat. He found on the inkstand a piece of india-rubber and he erased very carefully the first two letters of the word "unanswered." Then he proceeded to search in the pockets of the blotting-book which he had removed with the other paraphernalia from the desk.

McAron, while taking tea at Chimney House, had suddenly recollected a forgotten order. His master had told him that he was returning from Rexford by the 4.30 train, and had asked him to see that Williams met the train with the dog-cart. McAron had forgotten to give the message. He must return instantly and deliver it, or Williams would not be able to meet the train.

Widow Gale was much concerned that he was obliged to leave his tea unfinished, and the beautiful scones which she had been busy making all the morning untasted.

"I'll be seeing you on Saturday at Miss Aggie's play," she called out after him. "'Deed, but she's a bonny child is Miss Aggie!"

The perspiration was pouring down McAron's face when he turned into Woodbourne. He had been running all the way.

To reach the stables he had to pass by the library window. The window was closed now, but all the same McAron could see clearly into the room. He noticed a white-haired man bending over the table.

"Why, the master's returned!" he gasped. "He must have caught the three o'clock, and walked up from the station."

Instead of telling Williams to meet the 4.30 train, he would tell him he need not take the dog-cart to the station, since the Colonel had returned.

McAron loitered for a few moments talking to Williams in the yard. There Bryant joined them, for it was half-past four, and the servants' tea was over.

McAron left the yard just in time to see a white-haired man walking swiftly down the drive. On the drive the under-gardener was again at work. McAron saw the man, whom he supposed to be the Colonel, stop and speak to the under-gardener. He saw him shake his head. Then he watched him continue his way to the gate.

"So he's off again," he said. "Seems in a hurry too."

McAron could not see which way the old man turned as he passed out through the gate. Had he been able to do so, however, he would have observed that he turned into the woods.

"Look! look!" Aggie cried. Through the trees she and her friends had caught a glimpse of the bogus Colonel.

"That odious child," fumed Herr-Monsieur, "told me that she must be home by half-past four!" He

pulled his watch out. It was now nearly a quarter to five.

Dense shrubbery grew upon his left.

Aggie and her friends were in the undergrowth through which they pushed their way to join the "Colonel." They were calling to him all the while, "Wait for us, Colonel, wait for us, we're coming as quickly as we can."

They disappeared for a moment behind some thickly clustering furze. When they reappeared they were in full view of the path. There was not a soul in sight!

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE CRYPTIC MESSAGE

THE boys were out from school.

"I am glad we didn't have a special Oxo class to keep us in until five o'clock," said Peter, as he and his Patrol set off for the woods. "I never told you, did I," he continued, "that I met Baine this morning when I was sprinting home to lunch? I couldn't resist asking him if he'd heard anything of the robbers who had broken into Woodbourne. Of course he hadn't found a thing, because he never said a word. He just stood there smiling in that superior way of his, as though he wanted me to believe that he could tell me if he liked, but didn't choose to do so. I'm determined," said Peter, "absolutely determined to beat old Baine!"

"I wonder what 'sign' we are going to find to-day?" said Fraser, full of interest.

"Oh, heaps, I expect," said Peter. "I have to keep things pretty dark at home," he continued,

" for my sister Aggie's dead nuts on the burglars, and she always wants to hear all about our adventures the very moment I get into the house. You should have heard her inquiring after Danger last night! You really might have thought that she knew something of the capture if it hadn't been quite impossible. If we meet that gang face to face," said Peter grandly, " it will be a fight to the finish, I'm thinking. Yesterday's episode was certainly an unfortunate thing as far as you were concerned." He had turned to speak to Danger now. " But it was a pretty lucky ' do ' for the Patrol, I consider. I've been thinking things over, and I've come to the conclusion that the Oak Tree is a kind of central meeting-place for the gang."

" We're making straight for that Oak Tree, aren't we ? " Lambert asked.

" Rather ! " said Peter. " I've a feeling that the robber's lair is somewhere within its immediate vicinity."

They followed the main track till they came to where the paths branched. Here they turned aside, just as the girls had turned aside an hour earlier in the afternoon, and made towards that almost historic Oak Tree. Peter marched ahead with his Corporal. All the time his eyes were roving round to observe " sign." It was he who brushed aside the branches and was the first to discover the notice on the tree. He went up to it. Lambert followed; the others closed in round him. His eyes were literally sparkling as he unpinned the paper.

" Eight o'clock to-night. A. L.," was what he read aloud.

He had the same trick that Aggie had of wrinkling up his brow when he was perplexed about a thing. He was scrutinizing the, to him, inexplicable device

which headed the paper upon which the message had been written.

"What do you make of it?" he asked of Lambert, and pointed to the drawing.

"It's a chimney right enough," the Corporal answered.

"Yes, it's a chimney," Stewart agreed. He was peering at the drawing over Lambert's shoulder. "Look at the smoke," and he pointed to the rush of what Aggie had intended to be water.

"Yes," said Peter. "It's a chimney. But why should the drawing of a chimney be pinned on to the Oak Tree with a message like this attached to it? 'Eight o'clock to-night. A. L.,'" he mused. "Who is A. L.? that's what I want to know."

"A. L.," O'Neill remarked, "must be somebody's initials."

"Clever boy!" said Peter. "A. L. is somebody's initials, but whose?"

"The initials of the leader of the robber band," suggested Fraser.

Peter started. "Yes," he said, looking approvingly at Fraser. "I believe, Number 5, you've hit the right nail on the head. This message is obviously a message from the leader of the gang to his followers. But what do you make of the chimney?" he continued. "What does the chimney mean? Does a chimney suggest anything to any of you?"

Each boy shook his head.

"Can anybody think of a special chimney," Peter went on, "to which this drawing might refer?"

"Of course, there's Widow Gale's chimney," Danger said.

"Yes, there's Widow Gale's chimney," Peter answered. He was thinking deeply.

"Widow Gale's house is always known as Chimney House," Fraser volunteered.

Suddenly Peter clapped his hand upon his knee. "I have it all! It is as clear as daylight!" he exclaimed. "Can't any of you see the meaning of that message? To-night there is going to be a second burglary in Ashleigh; that burglary is to take place at Chimney House"—Peter pointed to the drawing—"at eight o'clock to-night. Let that gang come to the Tree and search for its orders!" Peter cried. "There'll be no orders awaiting it to-night." And he put the notice, which he had unpinned, into his pouch. "There'll be no message from their leader to those ruffians this evening at all events! In fact," he added, "if I've anything to do with it, those ruffians shall not see their leader again for some time to come. We're going to wait here and catch the rogues red-handed."

Peter lay down at full length on the grass, and the others were preparing to follow suit; but no sooner had he lain down than he was up again.

"No," he said, "we'll not receive them here; we'll receive them all, leader and gang, at eight o'clock to-night at Chimney House. Let them have their message if they like; much good it'll do them! They'll have a warmer reception than they anticipate!" he gloated, as he walked towards the Tree, pushed aside the branches once again, and repinned on to the bark the message which he had at first intended to confiscate. "A warm reception," he repeated, as he signalled the "Panthers" to follow him. "They'll have a warm reception right enough! There'll be a hidden fire within the vicinity of that Chimney of which they little dream!"

## CHAPTER XV

### MISTAKEN IDENTITY

It was five o'clock.

A man with white hair and a white moustache had turned into the gates of Woodbourne. He did not wear his hat crammed down over his ears; he wore it on the back of his head. He was very red and angry in the face. He stumped up the drive and across the lawn towards the window of the library, which Herr-Monsieur had closed behind him when he had departed from the house.

The Colonel pulled open the doors. He went into the library. It was as he had left it in the morning. To outward appearances nothing had been touched.

Straight to the bell he stumped. He pealed it savagely. Because it was not answered the moment he had rung it he pealed it again.

McAron knocked upon the door.

"Come in!" the Colonel shouted. "What is the meaning of this?" he continued. "Why do I order the dog-cart to meet the 4.30, and why is that dog-cart not sent?"

"But, sir——" began McAron, distinctly flustered.

"Answer my question!" the Colonel thundered, "and if you cannot answer it, send Williams to me. I shall give Williams a month's notice. I've never heard of such insubordination!"

"But, sir——" stammered McAron.

"Have you nothing save excuses to offer me?"

"But, sir," McAron made a desperate effort to explain, "you came home by the three o'clock, and you walked up from the station!"

"I did what?" the Colonel gasped. "I came

by the three o'clock ? I walked up from the station ? Man, are you absolutely mad ? "

" You were sitting in the room here at half-past four. I saw you with my own eyes," poor McAron stammered.

" Sitting in this room at half-past four ? How could I have been sitting in this room at half-past four when I only reached Ashleigh station at that hour ? "

" But didn't you leave this house just after half-past four, just after I had seen you sitting at the table, and hurry down towards the gate ? "

" Don't I tell you," stormed the Colonel, thoroughly exasperated, " that I reached Ashleigh, from Rexford, at half-past four ? "

" But I saw you speaking to Brown, the new under-gardener whom Bryant engaged this afternoon."

" I tell you I wasn't here at half-past four, nor at a quarter to five either; that I didn't even know I had a new under-gardener, by the name of Grey, or Black, or whatever it is ! "

" But you really did speak to him," McAron insisted. " I saw you shake your head. There's Brown himself ! " he cried. The under-gardener was passing by the window. " I'll ask him if you were not speaking to him at half-past four."

McAron went towards the window. He opened it wide. He beckoned the under-gardener to approach.

The under-gardener came towards him sheepishly, pulling his forelock with his finger and thumb.

" Bring him into the room," said the Colonel. " Bring him into the room."

And into the room McAron brought the under-gardener.

" At half-past four this afternoon," McAron said, " you were working on the drive ? "

"I was," Brown replied.

"And while you were working your master came out and spoke to you? He was walking down from the house towards the gate."

Brown looked blankly at McAron. "No one spoke to me at all," he said.

"But I saw him!" McAron cried. "First of all he shook his head, and then he said something to you and you answered back."

"Answered back?" the Colonel interrupted. "I'll have no under-gardener answering me back!"

"Replied, I should have said," McAron corrected, growing more mystified each moment.

"I didn't speak to no one, and no one spoke to me," persisted Brown.

"There! you hear what he says?" the Colonel cried. "If you're feeling ill, McAron, you'd better go to bed. I'm going to inquire from Williams why the dog-cart was not sent."

"It wasn't sent," poor McAron was half-sobbing now, "because, because I told him it wasn't any use to do so as you had returned home."

"Enough of this folly! Leave the room!" The Colonel brought his hand down heavily upon the desk. Then he turned to Brown.

"You are the new under-gardener, I believe?" he said.

"I am, sir," the man replied.

The Colonel pricked up his ears. He had been too angry to notice the man's intonation when he had been previously speaking, but in this short sentence "I am, sir," he had detected a foreign accent.

"You are not English?" he said sharply.

"I am a Swede," the man replied.

"A Swede!" the Colonel cried. "You might as well tell me you're a turnip or a cabbage, for I'd as soon believe you! Do you think I don't know what nationality you are? You cannot deceive me." The Colonel was irritated, angered; his temper at the best of times was none too peaceable. "I'll have no foreign servants round my place," he stormed, "spying upon my movements! I'll not have it. I tell you, you're dismissed. You need not come again. Oh yes, yes, have a week's wages if you like, but don't dare to show your face near this house or I'll send you flying!"

Brown left the room as he had entered it, through the window. The Colonel pulled the window to. He bolted it. Out of his pocket he took a bundle of papers carefully tied up with red cord. He unfolded them one by one and spread them out upon his desk. He bent over them and stroked them. They were the plans of his famous Aero-Destroyer.

"It was a good thing I took you with me," he said. His rage was abating now. "I wouldn't have trusted you here alone with that man about the place, that red-haired foreigner who calls himself—Brown!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### AN IMAGINARY HEROINE

THE ex-gardener walked rather sulkily down the pathway leading to the rustic gate. He did not look much pleased at being dismissed. Having passed through the gate he did not at once proceed into the woods. He picked up a twig, skinned it with his teeth, then threw it away with a muttered exclamation

of annoyance. Perhaps he did not hurry because he had much to think about; perhaps because, in the distance, he could hear light voices. He might have been waiting until the owners of those voices had plunged into the depths of the woods. Those voices were carried to him on the wind, for a breeze had come rippling through the trees, the herald of a storm which was to break before the morning dawned. The voices which had attracted the attention of the red-haired gardener belonged to the third group of explorers who had entered the woods that afternoon.

B♯, Joan and Phyllis, were under the impression that they had the woods to themselves, for as they had entered by the pathway leading from the high road they had seen the boys leaving by the main track. When the red-haired gardener had first caught the sound of their voices they had been pushing their way through the bushes which led towards the Oak Tree.

"I don't believe we'll ever find the burglars," Joan said pessimistically.

"Where shall we look first?" B♯ asked a trifle half-heartedly.

"I'm sure I don't know," Joan replied. "Oh!" she said suddenly, "look! what lovely blackberries!" She had caught sight of a bush which was growing by the branch paths.

"They're the finest I've seen this year," said B♯. She forgot about the burglars, about the search they had come to make as she ran towards the ripe fruit, followed by the easily-led, rather timid Joan.

"I don't think that Aggie would like us to eat blackberries when we're hunting for burglars," said Phyllis, rather sanctimoniously. "We haven't looked

either to see what notice she has left us on the Tree."

"Well, you go and find out what it is, Miss Virtuous," said B♯, her mouth crammed full of fruit, "and come back here and tell us all about it."

"All right!" said F.F., and she turned away with a rather nice feeling of self-righteousness.

When Phyllis had departed, B♯ too was conscience-smitten.

"Perhaps we oughtn't to be eating blackberries when we're scouting," she said slowly.

"Perhaps we oughtn't," Joan agreed.

And scarcely knowing why they went that way, or for what they were looking, they left the blackberry bush and began to hurry down the path which led towards the Lonely Farm

When Phyllis reached the Oak Tree she pushed aside the heavy drooping branches under which Aggie had said that notice would be hidden. Yes, there it was, pinned, just as Aggie had said it would be pinned, on to the trunk of the Tree. There was no mistaking that the message was a "Spout" message, for was it not signed with the device of the Patrol—the spout with water gushing from it? When Phyllis unpinned it, she little thought it was not Aggie, but Peter who had been the last to pin it there.

Phyllis, having read the message, tucked it into the pocket of her tunic

Oh, those blackberries! They seemed to grow everywhere. Just behind Phyllis there was a bush even more thickly clustered with ripe fruit than that one which she had left to the mercy of B♯ and Joan. She looked about her. There was no sign of Joan or B♯ anywhere. She had condemned them for eating blackberries, but they hadn't earned them.

They had done no work at all, and she had found the notice on the Tree. She had unpinned it, and was now about to carry it back to the others. The branches, which she had been obliged to push aside, had been heavy branches. She had run a little, and running had made her out of breath, and when she was out of breath she was always thirsty. She had a right to be thirstier than B♯ had been.

She looked very longingly towards the bush. They were the biggest blackberries she had seen. Suppose she were to hold a blackberry in her hand just to feel how nice and soft it was? She picked one. She felt quite guilty as she did so. There wouldn't be any harm, would there, in eating one blackberry? She was getting thirstier every minute. Lest her conscience should again accuse her, she popped that blackberry very quickly into her mouth. How good it was! Now she had eaten one, it wouldn't much matter if she ate another.

Blackberry after blackberry made its way down F.F.'s "red-lane." A sadly "give away" purple ring encircled her button mouth. And then, just as she was stretching up to reach some blackberries which grew on a high branch, she heard the crackling of twigs as though some one with a heavy foot was walking over fallen branches.

Phyllis forgot the blackberries for which she had been reaching. It might be one of the burglars for whom she was supposed to be looking. Down behind the bush she ducked; trembling all over, she crouched behind the sheltering bramble. Some one was passing close beside; had she not hidden herself instantly she would have been discovered.

The some one was a man in working clothes. He was red-haired. He paused beside the blackberry

bush, and stood with his back turned towards it. Then something happened which made Phyllis start up with surprise. The man had taken off his cap. He was twirling it round between his fingers. There came rushing through the trees a gust of wind stronger than any gust that had blown that day. It blew around the man's head; it caught his red hair. It whisked it off, and in the brief moment before it had been recaptured by its owner, Phyllis saw that underneath the red wig was a crop of hay-coloured hair. It was dreadful, dreadful! She quaked and trembled more than ever.

He had replaced the wig now; he had replaced the cap; and in a few moments more he moved away.

He forced a passage through the bushes, tracking right all the time. Not until he had disappeared entirely from view did Phyllis dare to move. Then, still feeling a little weak and "trembly," she struggled on to her feet. She had a very great deal indeed to tell the others. How much she would have to tell Aggie at that meeting to-night! How pleased Aggie would be at all she had discovered! Phyllis felt that, at the meeting to be held that evening in the apple loft, she would indeed be the heroine of the hour. She had seen a man who had red hair and hadn't! And this was what she told the others when she met them returning from the direction of the Lonely Farm, having met no one save Aggie's friend, Herr-Monsieur, who had been taking, so he told them, a little constitutional in the woods.

"I've—I've seen something dreadful!" she exclaimed. "I've seen a man who had red hair and hadn't!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### AN AWKWARD DILEMMA

When Aggie returned home from her expedition to the woods she found her mother waiting for her in the car.

"Aggie dear, how late you are!" her mother said reprovingly.

"Sorry, Mummie," Aggie said. "I was detained, regretfully detained," she added.

"Now, I suppose," her mother said, "I shall have to wait while you change your dress. Why do you wear your tunic all day long now, darling?"

"It's so free and easy, Mummie," Aggie said.

Aggie dashed indoors. Certainly she was a wonderfully quick changer. She reappeared scarcely ten minutes later in a clean pink cotton frock, carrying her "Polar Bear" over her arm.

There was no Pearson on the car this time. Her father was at the wheel.

"Daddy going to drive!" she cried excitedly. "Oh! I may sit in front, mayn't I? That is to say if you don't want to, Mummie dear," she added quickly.

"You won't forget to thank Aunt Margaret for the lovely sash she gave you, will you, dearest?" said her mother. "You didn't think of wearing it to-day. I think Aunt Margaret would be pleased if you were to do so. Suppose you run indoors and fetch it now?"

"Oh! Mummie, it would set my teeth on edge," gasped Aggie desperately. "A pink dress and a red sash! And you always say you're so artistic! Besides, hadn't I better keep it nice and fresh for

the theatricals ?" she added, the moment the idea flashed across her mind.

Seated in the front of the motor, Aggie for a little while was unusually silent. She was pondering over the lost sash. She always did things hastily. Frequently she was afterwards compelled to regret that she had acted on the impulse of the moment. She very much regretted now that she had not taken some old ribbon instead of that new sash to decorate her staff. The sash, she presumed, must still be in Danger's possession, but how to get it away from him?"

"Well, Miss Monkey, why so quiet ?"

They were climbing up a hill, and with his free hand her father pinched her cheek.

"I was thinking, Daddy, that was all," she said. "Oh! Daddy," she continued quickly, "I've got a new friend who doesn't speak any English. He's lodging at Chimney House. He's a Spaniard, and his name is Don Qui."

"Don how much ?" said her father.

"Oh! it isn't really," Aggie said, "I've only named him that. I want to introduce him to you, if I may, please, because you and he could have a lovely little chat together, and it must be so dull for him not understanding anything that people say to him."

They had reached the brow of the hill.

"Any friends of yours are friends of mine, little girl," he said.

He had not really been paying much attention to Aggie's chatter. Now that he was taking a steep hill he paid less. Once again Aggie relapsed into silence.

"*Amigo*—the friend," she muttered to herself. '*Ud estaba*—you were; *caza*—the house."

No sooner had Aggie repeated to herself the word " house " than the car drew up before that house in which her aunt lived.

Her uncle and her aunt came out to receive their guests. Straight away her uncle carried her father off to inspect his new Daimler in the garage. Aggie followed her mother indoors.

Aggie sat on a little stool. Her mother sat beside her aunt on the sofa.

" Peter still keen on the ' Scouts ' ? " Aunt Margaret asked of Aggie.

" Fearfully keen," said Aggie.

" Pity Aggie's not a boy." Her aunt came and stood by her and she patted Aggie on the shoulder. " You'd have made a splendid little Scout," she reflected.

" There are Girl Scouts," said Aggie.

" Yes," her aunt replied, " there are Patrols, I believe, in some places."

" One Scout in the house is quite enough," her mother interposed. " Do you know what Peter told us the other night ? Why, he told us that we had no need to fear burglars while he was there to keep an eye on things. With Boy Scouts to look after our interests we shall have no need of the police ! "

It was not until they were leaving that Aggie remembered to say " thank you " for the sash.

" It is such a lovely colour," she exclaimed, and she kissed her aunt on either cheek.

" A little sunburnt girl like you," said Aunt Margaret, and she pinched Aggie's cheek, " can always wear bright colours. I am looking forward to seeing you wear that sash on Saturday night at the theatricals."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE HIDDEN HUT

Don Qui had lingered on the Oak Tree Pathway until the voices which had attracted his attention had apparently gone out of hearing. Then he had struck the main track and made his way to the Oak Tree. He had paused by the Tree because for one moment he had fancied he heard some sounds. What might have been a terrible misadventure had overtaken him while he stood there listening acutely. An unexpected gust of wind had come sweeping through the trees and had swept off the red wig which had covered his fair hair. Very hastily he had replaced the wig, looking round to see that no one had observed its temporary removal. Then he had continued to push his way through the undergrowth. He knew just where to avoid the most prickly brambles. It was not the first time he had gone that way. He stopped beside a patch of furze which grew so thick that the eye could not penetrate it. Behind those furze bushes, partly screened by the branches of a leafy elm, there lay concealed a dilapidated hut.

There was no door into this hut. The opening where a door should have been was filled with branches and twigs. The discharged gardener proceeded to remove the barricade; then he went into the hut. From the inside, he replaced the branches and twigs in the doorway. So low was the hut that even a man of medium height, such as the gardener, could scarcely stand upright. The hut contained nothing but a massive log, which must have once been dragged there to serve as a seat for some previous owner,

The gardener sat down on the log and commenced to unlace the rough boots he was wearing. The boots rather hurt him, for they were large and he had an unusually small foot. Having done this, he rose from his rude seat. He knelt down on the ground, and with all his might and main he pushed against the log. It moved; still he pushed, until the beads of perspiration were standing on his forehead. When at length it had been pushed aside, a large cavity, which had been recently made in the ground, was revealed. Out of this cavity the gardener took the non-committal suit of dark-brown tweed which he had been wearing when he left Chimney House that morning.

He looked round anxiously. He listened intensely. He was certain that some one was fumbling with the twigs.

"Who is it?" he muttered underneath his breath.

"A friend," came the reassuring reply.

It had been agreed between the conspirators that so long as they were in England, as far as possible they would avoid their mother tongue.

Herr-Monsieur came into the hut.

"I've been dismissed," Don Qui remarked. "I was dismissed because I was a foreigner. If I am found round Woodbourne upon any future occasion I am to be sent flying. If the *brave* Colonel but knew, that is what I desire more than anything else—to be sent flying in an Aero-Destroyer of his own designing. There was the *brave* Colonel upon one hand—there was his servant upon the other. There they stood, the servant assuring the master that he had seen him writing at his table that afternoon at half-past four, the master saying he could not have done so, since he was but arriving at Ashleigh station at that moment.

The servant had seen the venerable gentleman whom he believed to be his master speak to me on the drive. I was called in to verify his assertion."

"And you?" Herr-Monsieur said.

"I?" Don Qui answered. "I, of course, had spoken to no one. Oh, it was really most amusing! You discovered nothing in the room? Nothing in the clock?"

"Nothing," said Herr-Monsieur. "There was no sign of those papers for which I sought."

Spies in the service of a Master Spy, they had been sent to try and obtain possession of the designs of that great Aero-Destroyer, of which news had filtered out of England, despite all the precautions that had been taken. The capture of these papers meant a handsome reward for the Master Spy and for the accomplices whom he had dispatched upon his errand. These accomplices were well aware of the fate which must overtake them should their purpose be discovered. For, though their country might be eager and willing to pay well to gain such information, she might not show her approval publicly, since friendly relations existed between England and herself.

"Whilst I was at Woodbourne I wrote a letter, however," he continued. "It is as well you got your dismissal, for we are moving to-morrow."

As the Master Spy commanded Herr-Monsieur's movements, so he, in his turn, commanded those of Don Qui.

"I am tired," he said, "of those children. One meets them everywhere. Only this afternoon when disguised as the Colonel I met a handful, but 'she' wasn't with them—their leader, as they style her. If she had been, I should not have been able to shake them off till night-time. I wish they were all at the

bottom of the sea, or at all events that cunning little ferret they call Aggie Phillips."

"Look!" Herr-Monsieur had pulled a paper from his pocket. The paper was the plan which Patty had found lying in the woods that morning.

"You must have dropped that on the path. Your carelessness very nearly cost us dear. It would have done so, had I not had the ingenuity, when the ferret and her friends were rushing off on a false clue I had given them, to change this plan for a plan of my own devising, one which, if they follow closely, will lead them far afield. We must, however, remain within the vicinity. I have this moment discovered a new residence which should suit us to perfection. The Lonely Farm they call it. Few dare venture within its precincts, for its owner is a crabbed, ill-tempered miser, who dwells there with no companion save his dog, and visitors are never welcome. But I think that golden sovereigns," and Herr-Monsieur chinked the money in his pocket, "will gain us the sanctuary we need. From to-morrow onwards we are to be working men. We are to be carpenters in the employ of Mr. Rogers. I have myself written a letter on the Colonel's paper to recommend us. Mr. Rogers is responsible for all the Colonel's repairs. Blinds may break or locks get out of order at any moment," said Herr-Monsieur sagaciously. "In the dark this evening we will remove all our possessions from this hut to Chimney House, from whence we will have them dispatched by carrier to Rexford. I am not wishful that Madame Gale should know we are lodging at the Lonely Farm. We will take everything away to-night save Babette."

As Herr-Monsieur spoke, he took out a large doll from the cavity and dandled it.

"Babette," he said, "is too precious to be trusted to the carrier. She shall be packed in a brown paper parcel. Poor silent Babette! She will not like being packed up, but she shall not be parted from her fond parent any longer. She shall go and stay with him at the Lonely Farm, where there will be no prying eyes such as Madame Gale's and the like to find her. We will instal ourselves at the Lonely Farm to-morrow, and will apply for work at Rogers'. I think they will take us," said Herr-Monsieur, "for we have an excellent reference; and besides, we will work at half wages. During the next few days we must make the boldest attempt we have yet made to secure those plans which, in the hands of our Government, will crush the power of Britain, and bring her, a supplicant, to the feet of one who, in the future, will be the most powerful nation in the world."

Herr-Monsieur while he had been talking had been dandling Babette all the time. As he concluded, he replaced her very tenderly in the cavity and he and Don Qui pushed back the log.

From the deserted hut they went, leaving it as they had found it, dark, hidden away among the furze, with briars and brambles growing up to its roof.

As they came out of the wood, dressed as Widow Gale's visitors once more, they heard the hooting of a motor horn. Instantly they moved from the road on to the grassy track which ran beside it.

The car dashed by them. In that car beside her father sat Herr-Monsieur's "*chère Mademoiselle.*"

"Daddy, Daddy! that's them!" she cried as she caught sight of her friends. "That's Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui. Don Qui is the poor lonely foreigner I told you about, who only speaks Spanish.

Do stop the car, please Daddy, and then I can bring him up and introduce him to you."

Mr. Phillips, ever indulgent where Aggie was concerned, pulled up the car. Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui were some little way behind.

Aggie sprang from the car. Towards her friends she ran, crying at the top of her voice the Spanish sentence which she had acquired from the grammar-book, and tearing off the "Polar Bear" she had been wearing in the car.

"*Chère Mademoiselle,*" exclaimed Herr-Monsieur, when he had responded with his customary magnificence to Aggie's salutations, "but what does it all mean?"

"Mean?" said Aggie. "Why, it's Spanish! I learnt it so as to be able to talk to Don Qui. I thought it would make it less dull for him, and the English of it is," she proudly announced, "Your friend was in the garden, you were in the house!"

Herr-Monsieur started.

"But, *chère Mademoiselle,*" he commenced, "I was not near——"

"Oh," Aggie said lightly, "it doesn't mean anything, it was only a make-up sentence that I learnt from the grammar-book."

"Yes, yes," said Herr-Monsieur, laughing nervously, "I understand. Look how pleased my friend is to hear once again his mother's tongue?"

Aggie looked up at Don Qui. There was not a vestige of a smile upon his face, but he bowed very slowly, and, with a gracious gesture, relieved Aggie of the coat she was carrying.

"His mother's tongue?" said Aggie. "I want him to hear my father's now!" she cried, "for my father is waiting in the car at the bottom of the road,

waiting to speak Spanish to your friend. My father speaks Spanish like a native. Come on, come on!"

Aggie seized hold of the end of the walking-stick which Don Qui was carrying. She rested it on her shoulder and grasped hold of the ferrule; Don Qui was holding the crook.

"Come on! Come on!" she urged, and she ran ahead as though he and she were playing at "tandem horses" and she was the leader. "Herr-Monsieur shall pretend to be the coachman, and whip us up!" she cried. "He must go on saying 'gee-whoop.'" But it was Aggie herself who shouted "gee-whoop" all the time.

She could not see the car now, for her father had turned down a side track to speak to Dr. Pettlet, who was pumping up the tyre of his bicycle outside a patient's cottage.

"Gee-whoop, gee-whoop!" she kept shouting all the while as she ran along the turfpath.

Though she was still conscious of the weight at the end of the stick, it did not seem to Aggie that Don Qui was pulling quite so much as he had pulled at first.

"Good!" she said, "you're keeping up at a splendid trot."

Never once did she look behind her. She was far too absorbed in the game she was playing. She had reached the corner of the road round which the car was waiting.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she cried, "I've brought him. Now for your best Spanish!"

She turned round quickly, only to discover that there was no Don Qui at the other end of that stick; there was no Don Qui or Herr-Monsieur, anywhere in sight! The weight which she had felt as she had run

along had been the weight of her own blanket coat which had been hung on to the crook of the walking-stick!

## CHAPTER XIX

### ESPIONAGE

THE "Panthers" had returned to their respective homes full of the burglary to be committed that evening.

Peter, rather to his relief, had found the schoolroom at the White House deserted. Aggie had gone out to call with her mother. At that moment, had Peter but known it, she was suffering tortures over the possible inquiries which might be made for her red sash.

He sat in the window. He tore a sheet from the exercise book he had taken from his desk. On this sheet of paper he made a plan for the posting of the Patrol round Chimney House.

Behind the rhododendrons, on the front drive, he and Number 2 were to secrete themselves. Numbers 3 and 4 were to watch by the stile connecting the garden and the fields. Numbers 5 and 6 were to be in hiding in the backyard. By one of these three ways the burglars must enter. The Scout who first perceived them was to warn the others of their advent by the call.

It was just after half-past seven when the boys took up their positions. There was no moon, and being late in September the evening was a dark one. Only one light burned in Chimney House, the lamp in the front parlour. Peter knew that the front parlour had

been rented by Aggie's new-made friends. Would it be possible—here was an idea—that these strangers were possessed of a great deal of money, and that the burglars had got wind of this?

Peter and his Corporal crouched behind the rhododendrons. They heard footsteps coming up the drive. Peter gripped Lambert by the arm. They waited. The steps were the heavy steps of a man. But it was only the postman!

"Oh, I say, how sickening!" Peter said.

"I don't think it's time yet," Lambert whispered.

The light in the parlour was lowered; the window was thrown open. Out from the front door two men issued.

The foreigners closed the gate behind them.

"Those must be Aggie's friends," said Peter. "How I wish," he fretted, "the robbers would arrive!"

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Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui had the audacity to enter the woods by the short cut, the short cut which led through Colonel Norton's private grounds.

A light was burning in the library. On the drawn blind they could see the shadow of some one moving about the room.

Herr-Monsieur looked at Don Qui. Don Qui looked at Herr-Monsieur. Neither the one nor the other said a word. The same idea had occurred to them both. The Colonel was at work. It was more than probable that he was at work on the now practically completed plans of the Aero-Destroyer.

Herr-Monsieur laid his finger on his lips, and beckoned to Don Qui. Together they approached the window.

The blind had not been drawn down to its full

length, so that a man lying prostrate on the ground outside might see into the room. Herr-Monsieur had discerned this. He pointed to the unscreened pane. He lay flat on the ground. Don Qui lay beside him.

So silently had they come that the man at work in the room had not heard a sound. He gathered up the papers which had been spread out on the table. He folded them one by one, and tied a cord round them.

Herr-Monsieur waited to see if he would put the papers in the clock, but the Colonel had decided, for the moment, not to keep them in that hiding-place; there were too many people interested in that time-piece at the moment—the Scouts, the " Spouts " and McAron, for McAron was always worrying him to send it into Rexford to be " repaired."

He opened a drawer as though he meant to lay the plans inside. He hesitated, then he closed the drawer again. He had, apparently, not considered this to be sufficiently secure. He looked about the room. Then his face lit up. A new place of security in which to hide his priceless treasures had occurred to him.

He rang the bell. Before any one had time to answer it, he laid a cloth over the papers.

What order he gave to McAron Herr-Monsieur could not say, for he could hear only a low murmuring of voices. However, to his surprise, a moment or two later McAron returned, and, with an air of great solemnity, held out a large and important-looking tray on which lay a needle threaded with white cotton.

The Colonel dismissed McAron with a curt nod of his head, and locked the door behind him. Then he removed the cloth which covered the precious plans. He went towards the ottoman.

Herr-Monsieur, on all fours, drew a little nearer to the window.

The Colonel had knelt down on the floor. The ottoman was upholstered in a coloured cretonne. The Colonel, with the penknife he had taken from his pocket, was unripping a seam in the cushion. It was a very small piece that he unripped. Through the opening which he had made between the lid and its cotton covering, he pushed the priceless plans. Very laboriously, and with a heavy sigh, he sewed up the seam which he had unripped. Having completed the task, he rose stiffly to his feet again. He walked towards the desk. He felt easier in his mind. The plans were practically finished now. In a few days' time he would be rid of all responsibility, for the precious drawings would then be safely in the hands of those for whom they were destined — those who, like himself, had England's prosperity at heart.

He went towards the mantelpiece. Leaning against the brass-faced clock was the photograph of the Boy Scouts. He took it up once again, and as he looked at it, he smiled, as though some fresh idea had come into his head.

He leaned the photograph back once more against the clock, then he went towards the door. He unbolted it. He left the room.

Not one movement had Herr-Monsieur missed. He saw the Colonel leave the room. He knew that the plans, which he wanted before all else, were sewed up in the ottoman. He looked at Don Qui.

"Shall we attempt it?" he whispered.

But Don Qui hesitated, and as he hesitated, McAron opened the door very gently and came into the room.

"Too risky!" said Herr-Monsieur "It is the

servant now; at any moment it may be the master again."

Had they but known it, the master did not return to the library that evening.

"Hark!" said Herr-Monsieur. His nerves were at tension.

The church clock was striking eight. Herr-Monsieur, still travelling on all fours, began to creep towards the rustic gate followed by Don Qui. He turned, and gave one last look into the room he so longed to enter. McAron was about to leave the room. He was carrying the brass-faced clock in his arms.

## CHAPTER XX

### A NOCTURNAL DISCOVERY

"PHYLLIS has something to tell you." Joan pushed Phyllis forward as she made this interesting announcement.

They had assembled in the apple loft, not at eight o'clock as had been previously arranged, but at half-past seven, for, as usual, they were so eager to talk over "adventures" that they had arrived before time.

"Well, what is it, Miss Buffet?" Aggie was sitting on a barrel, her notebook open on her knees. As she spoke she removed her pencil from between her teeth and stuck it, grocer-fashion, behind her ear.

"Joan and B♯ weren't with me," Phyllis began excitedly, "they were eating blackberries by the branch paths."

"So that's the way you scout when I'm not there?" said Aggie, scowling darkly at the offenders.

"Well, we were thirsty," complained B♯. "And F.F. needn't talk," she muttered to herself. "We saw her mouth after she had been to the Oak Tree."

"They sent me," continued Phyllis importantly, "to see what message you had pinned on to the Tree. There were—were some——" Phyllis stumbled over the words and grew scarlet in the face

"Some ripe blackberries growing by the Oak Tree," Aggie interposed, "and you stopped to eat them?"

"They were the biggest I have seen this year," said poor Phyllis plaintively.

"Go on," said Aggie. "I suppose you didn't come here to tell me you ate blackberries?"

"It was when I was eating the blackberries 'it' happened." Phyllis paused impressively. "I was all alone," she continued. "Quite suddenly I heard some one pushing his way through the undergrowth. I lay down flat behind the blackberry bushes, so that the some one coming couldn't see me. Aggie"—Phyl's blue eyes looked rounder than ever through her very round glasses—"he was a man, a great big man, in working clothes! I kept quite still because I was afraid he might hear me, and I thought how dreadful it would be if he were really and truly the burglar. He stood with his back turned towards the bramble behind which I was crouching. Then there came a great big gust of wind. He had taken off his cap, and the wind whistled through his hair, and—oh, Aggie, it whistled his hair off!"

"Whistled his hair off?" screamed Aggie.

"His red hair," Phyllis said. "There was hay-coloured hair underneath. It didn't take him a minute to snatch at the hair——"

"Wig," corrected Aggie.

"Wig," said Phyllis meekly, "which the wind had

whistled off and to put it on again. He looked round, kind of guiltily as he did so, to see if any one was watching him. He hadn't an idea I was behind the bramble! And then he moved on."

"And you followed him?" said Aggie. "Which way did he go? Did he turn into a hut? Where was the hut? Did you see it? Could you find it again?"

"I didn't follow him!" said Phyllis blankly.

"Didn't follow him!" shrieked Aggie. "Didn't follow him!" she repeated, as though she could scarcely believe she had heard aright.

"Well, not at once," said Phyllis. "I went to find the others, but they weren't where I had left them."

"I suppose you gave the call?"

"Oh, what a pity," said Phyllis, "I never thought of that!"

"Never thought of it!"

"But I did find them after a little while. They had gone further into the woods."

"To get more blackberries!" scoffed Aggie.

"So I told them," Phyllis continued, as though she had not been interrupted, "about the man with the red hair—wig I should say—and we went back to the Tree directly I had told them."

"Oh, I can finish the story for you," Aggie interposed; she was feeling very vexed indeed. "When you got to the Tree there wasn't a sign of the man in sight."

"No, not a sign," said Phyllis.

Then Aggie told Phyllis, Joan and B♯ what she thought of them in no mild terms. She stood up on the barrel, and she stamped upon it with her feet.

"To think you were face to face with the burglar!"

"Face to back," corrected Phyllis.

Aggie was enraged to think that if Phyllis had but followed the "double-haired" man to his lair she would have found, no doubt, the hut for which she —Aggie—and the remaining "Spouts" had been searching all the afternoon!

She turned to Ruth and Patty. She ignored the others.

"I think that I can place my finger on the man who wears a red wig," she announced.

But Patty had divined what Aggie was about to say.

"I know, I know!" she cried. "He is the under-gardener Bryant engaged to-day, and whom we met coming through the woods, and whom we saw on the drive at Woodbourne! Who could mistake his scarlet hair? We'll go to Woodbourne to-morrow morning!" Patty cried.

"To-morrow morning?" Ruth was interrupting now. "To-morrow morning," she said, "will be too late. Even now it is too late to find the man at Woodbourne. Bryant told Smith, our gardener, that the Colonel dismissed him this evening."

"Then we cannot wait until to-morrow," Aggie said. "Who knows if this red-haired villain may not be contemplating a second burglary this very night? He is no doubt at this moment sheltering in that hut, for I am convinced now that it was this man who dropped the plan which Patty picked up in the woods. To-night we must find that hut!"

"Oh, but supposing he should be inside the hut!" said Joan. It was the first time she had spoken. "Suppose he should come out and attack us! He may not even be alone, he may have accomplices to aid him!"

"Oh yes, without a doubt he has accomplices,"

said Aggie. "Have you forgotten the woman and the baby?"

"But the man," said Joan, "who was seen with the woman and the baby had black hair."

"A man who has a red wig," Aggie said, "is just as likely to have a black one. Of this I am convinced: the gardener and the foreign-looking vagabond are one and the same person, and he lives in the hut for which I mean to search this evening."

"You needn't come, Joan," Aggie had got down from the barrel. "You aren't brave, and the 'Spouts' who go with me to-night must be brave 'Spouts.' You needn't come either, B♯—Number 4, I should have said," she corrected quickly. "You'd—you'd," and Aggie looked at her scornfully, "only get thirsty, and stop to eat blackberries by the way! Patty, Ruthie and I will go. We shall have to take Miss Buffet with us to show us which direction the red-haired villain took when he passed by the blackberry bushes behind which Number 6 was lying. Come," said Aggie, "shoulder staves!"

"Mayn't we really come?" B♯ exclaimed as Aggie passed her by.

"No," said Aggie firmly. "We shall have to be pretty quick," she added, "because I have to be home by a quarter to nine at the very latest."

"But won't it be too dark in the woods to see?" Patty inquired, as they found themselves on the drive. "Oughtn't we to carry bicycle lamps to give us light?"

"Good!" said Aggie, with appreciation. "I have two lamps," she said, "mine and Peter's. They're in the stable. You wait here;" and she lifted up the latch of the door which led into the coach-house.

The "Spouts" waited in a little cluster where Aggie had commanded. Somewhere a clock struck eight.

Aggie came out from the coach-house a moment or two later, bearing a lamp in each hand.

"Ruth and I will carry the lamps," she said. "We'll light them at the entrance to the woods."

Round the corner, as they turned it, the wind came whistling.

"On nights like these," said Ruth, as she clutched on to her hat, "I feel so very sorry for those at sea. Father says he thinks there'll be a fearful gale by midnight. I'm glad he isn't away now," Ruth continued, for Ruth's father, like B♯'s, was in the Navy.

They paused at the entrance to the woods. Aggie drew a box of matches from her pocket.

"Suppose we hadn't brought any matches with us?" Patty said.

"Oh, I always carry matches with me," Aggie answered grandly.

After a little trouble, the lamps were successfully lighted.

Ruth and Aggie, holding the lights above their heads, walked in front of the others Once Ruth stumbled over a loose twig; the twig snapped noisily. Phyllis trembled violently

They had reached the Oak Tree

Aggie gripped hold of Phyllis by the arm.

"You're—you're pinching me!" Phyllis fretted.

"I'll shake you in a minute! Yes, I will," said Aggie. "Were those"—Aggie was pointing to the blackberry bushes on her left—"were those the blackberry bushes behind which you were hiding?"

"Y—yes," said Phyllis

"And the red-wigged man was standing there?" Aggie stood a few steps in front of the blackberry bushes with her back turned towards them.

"Y—yes, I think so," Phyllis said.

"You haven't got to think," said Aggie firmly. "You've got to know."

"I do know," cried Phyllis a little tearfully.

"When he had taken off his wig and put it on again which way did he go?" Aggie asked. "To the right or left?"

"He went that way;" and Phyllis pointed to the right.

"At last!" said Aggie. "At last we know that the hut is to the right. The plan Patty found must have been a decoy plan Why hadn't I thought of that before? Of course it must have been.

"To the right, 'Spouts'!" she commanded, "to the right!"

Through the undergrowth Aggie discovered, by the light thrown from the lamps, a narrow muddy track along which she led the "Spouts." Ahead of her she could see some densely-growing furze; towering over the furze was a thickly-leaved elm tree. It looked as if a hut might, perchance, be hidden among that growth.

Aggie turned up the wick of her lamp that she might see better. As she did so a gust of wind swept through the trees; it blew out the flame. It also blew out the flame of the lamp that Ruth was carrying.

All was darkness in the wood; the "Spouts" could not see one yard in front of them. They could only hear the wind, which was responsible for their present plight, whistling through the leaves and howling round the trees.

"Oh!" cried Aggie aghast, "what shall I do? I've dropped the matches!"

. . . . . .

By the light of a candle which Herr-Monsieur had

taken from the can he kept secreted on a beam, Don Qui had proceeded to collect the miscellaneous clothing which had been heaped up in the cavity.

The accomplices had reached the hut in safety.

Among that heap lay some feminine garments. They included a skirt, a blouse, a shepherd-plaid shawl, and a bonnet made gay with a sprig of lilies-of-the-valley. Last of all, Don Qui had drawn out Babette.

"Give her to me," said Herr-Monsieur; and while Don Qui began to wrap up the clothing he had taken from the hiding-place in the plaid shawl which formed a portion of the woman's dress, he fondled Babette, and talked to her as though she were a living child, stroking all the while the painted locks which straggled down over her yellow brow and dipped into her black glass eyes; for though she was a rag doll, she had a china head.

"Only one more night shall my little darling be left to sleep here alone. Widow Gale can see through walls, so Babette's loving father thought she would be safer in this little hut, whose existence has long been forgotten; safer in her secret hiding-place. At the Lonely Farm there will be no one to trouble if Babette be there or no. So Babette's father will fetch her in the morning and take her to her new home. Then he must go and work, and Babette must tell no one of the secrets that lie concealed within her breast."

Herr-Monsieur had taken Babette over to the little mud heap in which the candle had been set up on the floor. He knelt down upon one knee, and on the other he perched Babette in a sitting posture. She was dressed in a funny little cotton dress, and had white socks on her legs, and the smallest black patent nursery shoes that can be bought.

"I suppose," he said a moment or two later—he had been playing with her all the time—"that it is so much flattery which has turned your head?" For now Babette's head, strange to say, was no longer looking over her toes. Those staring eyes were surveying her heels!

Herr-Monsieur continued to twist Babette's head until he had twisted it right off. In one hand Herr-Monsieur held the decapitated body; in the other the head. He laid the latter down upon the ground. He peered into the body. Then, from out of it he drew a sheaf of papers.

"There are those," he murmured as he did so, "who have kept plans sewed in the lining of their coats, kept them in various portions of their attire; but I prefer not to have about my person any incriminating papers."

By the light of the candle he was searching through the sheaf.

Of everything he had wished to commit to paper he had made a sketch. There was not one word in writing.

Herr-Monsieur selected that sketch which had evidently been most recently added to the collection, since it was numbered 7 and there was no other numbered higher. On paper Number 7 a complete drawing had been made of the Woodbourne library. Conspicuous in that drawing was the ottoman; and over it, just where Herr-Monsieur had seen the Colonel place the papers, he put a tiny cross. It was the Master Spy's wish that plans should be made as far as possible for the guidance of other spies should the pioneer emissaries fail in their endeavour.

Don Qui had tied up all the properties he had collected in the shawl. Herr-Monsieur rescrewed Babette's head on to her body.

"All ready?" said Herr-Monsieur.

Don Qui nodded in response, and he shouldered the bundle he had made. Herr-Monsieur tossed Babette back into the cavity.

"May your slumber be undisturbed," he said, dragging back the log over the hole.

Herr-Monsieur blew out the candle.

As they left the hut a gust of wind came tearing round the corner. So violent was the onslaught that it nearly swept them from off their feet. The elm tree, towering overhead, groaned and creaked.

Through the densely-growing furze they pushed their way—a little to the left of where the "Spouts" were grovelling in the darkness for the matches which Aggie had let fall.

. . . .

It took Aggie some while to find those matches; and just as she did so her sharp ear caught the sound of some one, or something, stirring among the furze.

"Quick!" she whispered. "Quick! Let us light our lamps, for I feel sure that I heard some one moving not very far away."

"It was probably only the wind you heard," said Patty. So high was the wind indeed, that only with the greatest difficulty could the "Spouts" relight their lamps. Even Phyllis's fat person made but an inefficient screen. When at length, however, the lamps were relighted, Aggie proceeded to search very carefully in the furze. But there was no sign of any one among the brambles save themselves. Whoever it was she had heard—for she felt convinced she had heard some one—he must have passed out of sight while she had been struggling in the blackness.

Then, quite by chance, she came across the hut.

"'Spouts'!" she gasped, and she held her lamp

so that the rays might fall on the deserted and dilapidated hovel. "Look! Look! Look!"

Ruth, Patty and Phyllis were standing round her

"Why!" said Phyllis, "I believe it's a hut!"

"Of course it's a hut!" cried Aggie, "and what's more, it's *the* hut!"

"You think," said Ruth, she was speaking softly, "that this is the burglar's hut?"

Aggie nodded her head vigorously.

Phyllis looked about her apprehensively. She tried to clutch hold of Patty's hand, but Patty took no notice.

"We shall find the woman sitting by the fire nursing the dear little baby," said Aggie. "If we were to wait long enough we should hear it crying, I expect."

"Sitting by the fire!" scoffed Ruth. "As if there wouldn't be smoke coming from a chimney if there were a fire in the hut!"

"You're so horribly practical," said Aggie. "Perhaps she is huddled in a dull, dark corner, and the baby is all stiff and cold! Maybe it's dead," said Aggie lugubriously, "and that is why we don't hear a sound. Anyway, I'm going to see." And Aggie made a movement towards the hut.

When Aggie reached the hut she knelt down on the ground and put her hand behind her ear. Though she waited some while motionless she did not hear a sound.

"There's no one in," she said at length, "neither man, nor woman, nor baby. It must have been they who passed when we were groping in the furze. I vote that we explore." She scrambled to her feet and went forward boldly. She pushed aside the branches in the doorway and peered into the hut. To

all appearances the hut had not been occupied by any living soul for many a long day.

"Where's the woman nursing the baby?" Ruth inquired as she came and looked over Aggie's shoulder.

"Out," said Aggie promptly.

"No woman, no baby ever lived here!" Ruth exclaimed.

"It certainly does look deserted," Aggie owned.

"But look, what's this?" She had entered the hut, and by the light thrown from her lamp she had observed the fag end of a candle set up in a mound of earth. "Some one *has* been here quite recently!" she cried triumphantly.

Phyllis, tired out, had seated herself upon the log. Ruth and Patty were diligently exploring every corner of the hut.

"Oh, Aggie!" Patty cried suddenly "There's something on that beam above my head. Only"—she tried to jump as she spoke—"I can't reach it."

Nor could Aggie, nor could Ruth. Certainly, they all agreed, there was something on that beam. They had espied the tin can in which Herr-Monsieur kept his surplus candles. Then Aggie, turning round, caught sight of Phyllis on the log.

"Off you get," she cried, "Miss Lazy Bones, and help us drag that log on which you're sitting over here! By standing on it we shall be able to reach the beam."

The four of them together pushed and pushed at the log. It moved a little. Encouraged by their success they pushed yet harder. Then Aggie gave a little scream, a little scream of delight, for underneath that log there was revealed a cavity. The tin can on the beam was forgotten in the excitement of the

moment. They did not recall it until the following morning.

"Then—then, it is the burglar's hut!" said Aggie.

She lay down on the floor and thrust her hands into the cavity. The others knelt around her and peered into the dark pit excitedly. Out of the cavity she pulled a large rag doll about the size of a three months' old baby.

"No wonder we couldn't hear it crying!" said Ruth slowly.

"So it was only a mock baby!" Aggie mused. "Assuredly it must belong to those vagrants, to the man who is sometimes a beggar and sometimes a gardener. Oh! you others, don't you see that we are very near the truth at last? All we shall have to do is to watch round this hut whenever we are free for the next day or two."

She was dandling the doll, just as Herr-Monsieur had dandled it a little while before.

"You're coming home with me," she said. "Oh yes, you'll have a very happy time, for I shall pet you and make much of you. And," she said, "and —yes, I think I'll call you after Herr-Monsieur's little girl. I'll call you Babette!"

## CHAPTER XXI

### SCOUTS VIGILANT

"It must be nearly a quarter to nine by now," said Peter.

He crouched lower. He was quivering with excitement, and straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. He could hear nothing save the moaning of the wind. The leaves of the copper beech rang together with a metallic sound as gust after gust whirled the branches one against another.

The boys watching by the stile also listened; so did those watching in the yard. No one spoke a word.

No stars were shining; it was a black night.

Peter drew a little closer to Lambert.

"Yes, it must be nearly a quarter to nine," he repeated.

"I don't believe they're coming after all!" said Lambert.

"We'll wait, at all events, and see," was Peter's answer. And again he listened intently, but still he could hear nothing save the rushing of the wind through the trees. Then, quite suddenly, he raised himself. He leaned upon his elbows. He was peering through the bushes. He had heard the gate open and close.

"Hist!" he said, and he put his finger to his lips.

Two dark figures were stealthily creeping up the drive. They were walking very slowly. It seemed as though they might have been carrying a heavy weight. But it was too dark for Peter to discern anything save the bare outlines of their forms.

He followed with his eyes the two figures as they passed by the rhododendron bushes, little dreaming that their every movement was being watched. They passed on towards the house, making a bee-line for the parlour window which the foreigners had left wide open.

Peter and Lambert crawled round the rhododendron bushes. So intent were the men upon their business that they never dreamed of turning to see if they were being observed. They climbed into the room through the open window, dragging something large and bulky after them.

" This isn't the first house they've visited, at all events ! " thought Peter, as he realized now that they were indeed carrying a bundle.

It was the time to follow up the villains.

At that moment, there flashed across Peter's mind all that this capture would mean for the " Panthers." " There must be a writing-table in the Club Room," he decided, " and an easy-chair, because the ' Hyenas ' had both."

Peter stepped out on to the drive.

" Kee-ook ! Kee-ook ! " he cried.

In an instant the Scouts came out from their hiding-places.

Peter waited that they might assemble. Then the six boys, on tiptoe, crept up to the house. They surrounded the parlour window.

Inside the parlour, the equally alert ears of a man had caught the sound of approaching footsteps. There was no sign now of that bulky package in the room. It was just as it had been an hour ago.

Herr-Monsieur lit the lamp. He went towards the window and pulled up the blind. He stood looking out, with an amused smile upon his face, at

the group of eager boys who were waiting round that window in a ring.

"And what can I do for you?" he asked.

Peter gazed astounded. He recognized the speaker to be Aggie's friend.

"But—but"—he stammered—"we're looking for the burglars—the burglars who climbed in through the window," he explained.

"The burglars?" said Herr-Monsieur. And he laughed. "So you've caught the fever too? All the youngsters of this neighbourhood," he said a little scornfully, "it seems, are absorbed in the fascinating pastime of burglar hunting."

"But I saw them enter through this window," persisted Peter, his vanity a little hurt at being called a youngster.

Then Herr-Monsieur laughed in a superior fashion.

"You saw my friend and myself enter by the window," he explained. "Had you been a little earlier at your posts you would have seen that we left it open when we went out for our walk. We invariably enter by the window to save Mrs. Gale the trouble of opening the front door."

Herr-Monsieur had laid a trap. He wished to know at what time the boys had begun to spy upon his movements.

Peter fell into the trap.

"We saw you leave the window open, and we saw you go out, sir," he said. "I beg your pardon," he continued. "We all beg your pardon."

"I have much pleasure in granting it," said Herr-Monsieur graciously. "But be careful," he advised, as he closed the window, "whom you track down as burglars in the future, for another time you may not escape so easily as you have done to-night."

He rattled down the blind.

Peter and his Scouts, sadly crestfallen, left Chimney House. Not only had they failed to catch the burglars, but they had made a very foolish mistake. It would be a long time before they could hold up their heads again when Herr-Monsieur was by.

They went straight to their respective homes. Had they waited a little longer they might have seen something which would have interested them exceedingly.

Out through the window, Herr-Monsieur and his friend, who had remained in the background while the conversation had been taking place, crept silently and cautiously. They were still wearing hats. They had donned again the overcoats they had taken off. They went up to the front door. They hammered on it with their knuckles, then began to talk loudly. They seemed to have forgotten they did not wish to disturb Mrs. Gale.

Mrs. Gale came shuffling down the passage.

"Oh, it's you?" she said as she opened the door.

"Yes, it's us," replied Herr-Monsieur, with a genial smile. "I am grieved to have disturbed you at your supper. It's been a very nice evening for a walk, a very nice evening indeed."

"One moment, Mrs. Gale," said Herr-Monsieur as he turned into the parlour.

Mrs. Gale, at Herr-Monsieur's request, followed him into the room.

"It is with deep regret," he said, "that my friend and I must leave to-morrow."

Mrs. Gale was about to speak of her deep regret, but Herr-Monsieur merely took her plump hand into his and patted it reassuringly.

"Alas!" he said, "the grief is all ours, *chère* Madame—the grief is all our own that we are obliged to leave somewhat earlier than we had intended. If we might have our little account to-night, if you would see that our luggage be sent to Rexford in the morning by the carrier, we should be exceedingly obliged."

And before Madame Gale had the opportunity of inquiring as to their future plans and ultimate destination, Herr-Monsieur had bowed her from the room.

## CHAPTER XXII

### PRELIMINARY TACTICS

When Aggie returned home carrying Babette in her arms, she found that her father and mother were still dining.

Aggie went up to the schoolroom. Peter was out; the room was deserted. "He's probably at some silly old Scout meeting," she reflected. She sat with her elbows on the table, reviewing the events of the past day. There was one thing that troubled her, and as she thought of it the lines on her forehead made a very big "M" indeed. This was nothing more or less than the disappearance of her red sash. She must take the bull by the horns, she decided, and make an attempt to reclaim that sash from Danger. There was nothing else to be done.

Acting, as she always did, on the impulse of the moment, she went straight to her desk and took out a sheet of note-paper, and the stylo pen which her mother

had given her on her birthday. She did not hesitate; she had made up her mind; she knew exactly what she meant to write.

"DEAR DANGER," she began in her untidy scribble—

"I believe you've a red sash? Would you mind lending it me for some theatricals? I want it to-morrow, please. I will meet you outside Woodbourne, after school, at twenty minutes to one.

"Awfully obliged if you can do this.

"Yours,
"AGGIE."

"PS.—Be a brick, and don't tell Peter I've written."

She folded the note and put it in an envelope, which she directed rather more carefully than she had written the contents—

"To
"Alec Tylston,
"Combe Lodge,
"Ashleigh."

Having written the note, Aggie was eager that it should reach its destination that very night. Saturday was the next day but one. What excuse could she proffer for not wearing the sash at the theatricals? No one would believe her if she said she had lost it. That was the true version of the story, anyway. To all intents and purposes she had lost that sash.

Aggie's bed-time was nine o'clock. It was nine now. She would just creep out for one minute and

see if Pearson were about. Pearson was a friend of hers and might be prevailed upon to take the note.

She slipped down-stairs. Her mother was singing in the drawing-room. Usually she waited outside the door to hear her mother sing. To-night, however, she hastened out.

Nowhere in the garden could she find Pearson. She walked down the drive which led on to the high road. Coming through the darkness, from the direction in which Rexford lay, she could hear the tramping of feet. She waited until the owners of those feet were close beside her.

They were two labourers; on their shoulders they were carrying baskets filled with turf.

"Why," she exclaimed, "it's Holland and Peterson!"

The men touched their caps to Aggie.

"Rough night, Miss," said one.

"There'll be some damage done before the morning," said the other.

"Where are you going to now, Peterson?" she asked.

"Taking this 'ere load to Widow Gale," the man she had addressed as Peterson replied.

"Oh yes," said Aggie. "I remember Pearson told me that Commander White was sending down some turf to Chimney House."

"We've been carrying loads down," Holland volunteered, "for the past week in our off-time. Mister Thomas Gale he sends up the baskets, and the Commander he sends down the turf. This be the last lot, however," he added with satisfaction. "We sticks it in that little shanty at the foot of Combe Ridge, and that little shanty's well-nigh filled by now."

" The little shanty at the foot of Combe Ridge ? " cried Aggie. " Oh, then, it wouldn't be fearfully out of your way, would it, to go back by Mr. Tylston's house, because I've a note, a most fearfully important note, that I want left to-night ? "

Peterson assured Aggie that it wouldn't be any trouble to leave the note. So he went on his way, with the turf upon his shoulder, his comrade by his side, and Aggie's note in the pocket of his tattered coat.

Aggie lingered for a moment outside the gate. The wind was playing havoc with her hair, but she didn't care a bit.

As she lingered, Peter came " mooching " up the road from the direction of Chimney House.

The moment Aggie caught sight of him she hid behind a tree, meaning to jump out on him as he passed by.

He turned in at the gate. Aggie gave a whoop. Peter, overwrought with the adventures of the evening, jumped. " You call yourself a Scout, and you jump when anybody whoops ! " said Aggie, and she stood before him, barring his way.

" Oh, it's only you ? " he said. " You ought to have been in bed hours ago ! " he added crossly.

" Yah ! " said Aggie, and she put her tongue out at Peter. " Well, how did this evening go off ? " she continued as she walked beside him up the drive.

" How did this evening go off ? " Peter started. What did Aggie know of the unfortunate episode ?

" Your meeting ? " Aggie said.

" Oh," said Peter, very much relieved, " that went off all right."

" Was Danger there ? " she asked.

" How you do harp on about Danger ! " Peter said.

They went into the house together, and passed up-stairs to their respective rooms.

"Riding to-morrow morning?" Aggie asked as she nodded good-night to Peter.

Peter paused a moment, and listened to the raging of the wind.

"If it's at all possible," he said.

"Oh, it'll have abated by the morning," Aggie answered. She knew that he was referring to the storm. "We'll ride at seven, I suppose?" she added, and she closed the door behind her.

. . . . . .

Captain Marshall had prophesied aright when he had said there would be a fearful gale by midnight.

Shortly after midnight Aggie was awakened from her sleep. It took a great deal to awaken Aggie. The wind was screaming down the chimney. Across the sky vivid lightning flashed. The lightning was followed by a peal of thunder which seemed to shake the house.

Aggie thrust her fingers into her ears.

"What a dreadful night," she said.

Yet another flash of lightning; yet another peal of thunder. Then down came the rain. It came down in volumes; the wind drove it violently against the window-panes. Then it ceased to thunder and the wind dropped. The rain fell more softly, and Aggie went to sleep again.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### A FRESH DEVELOPMENT

"It's grand!" said Aggie. Her cheeks were pink, and her eyes were sparkling. The little black velvet jockey cap she wore was hanging round her neck by its elastic. She and Peter had been for a long scamper on their ponies across the Downs.

She had been quite right when she had said that the storm would abate by the morning. It no longer even rained.

It was nearly breakfast-time and they were returning by the lane which led past Woodbourne.

"Hi, there! Hi!" On the terrace which overlooked the road somebody was standing waving to them wildly. It was the Colonel, who was often out betimes pottering in the garden.

Aggie waved her hand in response. But it was evident that the Colonel had something he wished to say to the pair, for no sooner had he caught sight of them than he dropped the rake which he was holding and came hurrying down the drive.

Seeing that he wished to speak to them, Peter and Aggie began to guide their ponies through the gate. But the Colonel waved to them furiously with his hands, as though to keep them back.

"Look out! Look out!" he cried. "You'll be crossing the spoor!"

In an instant Peter had dismounted; Aggie had followed suit.

"What—what—spoor?" Peter cried as he ran towards the Colonel. But the Colonel did not answer Peter's question. He stood there wringing his hands.

"My clock! My clock has gone!"

"Your presentation clock?" gasped Peter.

"You've been burgled again?" cried Aggie. Her thoughts flew instantly to the red-wigged gardener whom the Colonel had dismissed on the previous evening.

"You were burgled again last night?" Peter said astounded. "Besides the clock, what else did they take?"

He had drawn out his notebook. Aggie was dying to write down particulars as well, but, since her Patrol was a Secret Service Patrol, she dared do nothing before the Leader of the "Panthers." She listened intently all the while. There was little Aggie missed.

"Nothing was taken but the clock—nothing!"

"You would rather they had taken everything else, wouldn't you, and left the clock?" said Aggie. She spoke very sympathetically, and came and laid her hand on the Colonel's arm. "You told me last week——"

"Last week—last week," the Colonel interrupted, "if anybody had taken my clock last week——"

"But it's the same clock they took last night," said Aggie shrewdly.

"Oh!" cried Peter, "you really mustn't talk so much," and he gave Aggie a little push. "This is most important, and I have a great deal to find out. At what time, sir, did the burglary take place?"

"I went out from my library at eight. I have not seen my clock since that hour."

"At eight? At eight o'clock last night?" Peter nearly shrieked the hour. "They—they won't escape me a second time!" he cried.

"A second time?" muttered the Colonel underneath his breath.

But Peter had dashed off towards the house to hunt for "sign."

The Colonel had last seen the clock at eight upon the previous evening. The hour of eight was very much in Peter's mind. For that was the hour which had been written on the paper he had found pinned to the Oak Tree. Shortly before eight o'clock, he recollected, the foreigners had left Chimney House. They had returned with a bundle. He himself had seen them twist that bundle in through the window. Now it occurred to him to wonder what its contents had been. The cryptic chimney, and Chimney House! There must have been some connection between the two. Why, of course, how he had been duped the previous evening! Those foreigners were possibly the head of some gang—the gang which had attacked Danger. The message left upon the Oak Tree had been a message to inform the gang that their leaders were leaving Chimney House about the hour indicated to burgle Woodbourne. But A. L.? That was what baffled him. Who and what was A. L.?

They had bluffed him about the window. They should not bluff him again. Let the gang rest for the moment. The capture of its leaders would suffice; for the leaders, he had now determined, were the foreigners who were lodging with Widow Gale.

Peter was kneeling down in front of the library window. He could trace footsteps on the soil. He nearly screamed with delight. The footprints were the footprints of two men. He knew that they had been made by two people since the prints were of different sizes; like the footprints he had found

outside the drawing-room window, one was much larger than the other. They must have been made by the two men, who had left Chimney House at a quarter to eight, to perform a burglary committed, apparently, at eight o'clock. If he could but find out for whose name the initials A. L. stood!

Aggie had followed Peter up the drive.

The Colonel had returned to the terrace. He preferred to let the pair investigate by themselves.

"Found anything?" said Aggie. She, too, was inspecting on her own account.

"Found anything?" gasped Peter. "I've found the burglars!"

"Where?" said Aggie quickly. And she looked down as though she expected to see them lying at Peter's feet.

"Aggie," Peter was being cautious now, "you've made friends, haven't you, with the lodgers at Chimney House?"

"Huge friends."

"Do you happen to know," Peter turned his head away as though it were a subject of little interest to him, "what their names are, either, or both?"

"I know Herr-Monsieur's name," said Aggie promptly. "It's such a lovely name!" and Aggie reflected upon it with a sentimental smile upon her face.

"Well?" said Peter.

He did not say it impatiently. He knew that if he were to hurry Aggie she probably would tell him nothing.

"Herr-Monsieur's name," said Aggie, "is Count Augustus Lorraine." She pronounced each syllable slowly, lingering over it as though she loved to speak it.

'Augustus Lorraine? A. L.!" Peter could not pretend a want of interest any longer.

"Got 'em hot this time, got 'em all secure!" he cried. "I'm off for the Patrol to catch the pair red-handed. So like a girl," he scoffed, "to chum up with foreigners and make a fuss about them. It's your delightful Herr-Monsieur, as you call him, and his beloved friend, who stole the clock last night; who stole the silver cups, and who will steal everything they can lay their hands upon!"

"They didn't!" Aggie stormed. "They didn't!"

"Oh, didn't they?" said Peter. "I saw the wretches carrying home the booty myself."

"Why didn't you tackle them there and then?"

"How could I know that a burglary had been committed?" Peter answered. "I couldn't tackle a man, could I, because he was carrying a suspicious-looking bundle?"

Peter was running down the drive now. Aggie was pursuing him.

"You're not to say a word about it to the Colonel!" he shouted back across his shoulder. "You're not to say a word, because I want to bring the men to justice myself."

They had reached the gates. The Colonel was nowhere in sight, so they couldn't wave good-bye to him.

"I'm off to tell Henry and the others," he exclaimed. "Then to Chimney House to see what we shall see."

"You can't arrest them without a warrant," Aggie warned him.

"Bosh! Girls don't know everything," he retorted. "The furnishing of the Club Room is safe enough now, anyhow!"

Peter sprang on to his pony. Up the road he

galloped in the direction of the Lamberts' house. As he galloped, he overtook a boy on horseback. The boy was the Leader of the "Hyenas."

"Come to tea to-morrow week," cried Peter, "you and your Patrol?"

"Saturday?" the Leader shouted back. "Where, and at what time?"

"Four o'clock at our Club Room," was the answer. "We want you to christen our new furniture."

"Right you are!" the Leader of the "Hyenas" answered as Peter galloped past him.

A moment or two later he nearly galloped into a pedestrian. The pedestrian was Sergeant Baine of the local police force.

"Off to Woodbourne?" he exclaimed. "You're a bit late in the day." He could not resist this Parthian shot.

No sooner was Peter out of sight than Aggie had mounted her pony. The Lamberts' house lay in the opposite direction to that of Widow Gale.

"It's a wicked, wicked shame! He didn't do it!" she half sobbed. "They'll go and ask him awkward questions, I know they will. And he'll answer them, and maybe the answers will fit in when they oughtn't to. And Peter will put two and two together, as he calls it, and make four when the two and two he puts together ought only to make three. The 'Panthers' will lock Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui into their room, and some of them will be left to guard the door in case they knock it down, while Peter and some of the others go in search of the police. The police will handcuff poor Herr-Monsieur, and shut him up in a cold damp cell, and give him nothing to eat for days and days. It'll all be a hideous mistake. Oh! if I could only save

Herr-Monsieur. At least, if I can do nothing else"—Aggie had stopped her pony in the middle of the road—"I can warn him of what is likely to happen so that he may not be taken unawares. It would be a shame to take a foreigner unawares; he wouldn't have a chance. If I warn him, he will be able to defend himself. It's horrid of Peter; it's horrid of the boys to think that Herr-Monsieur could do anything so dreadful as burgle the Colonel's house."

Aggie's rage was cooling down a little now; she was smiling a smile born of superior knowledge. They didn't know as much as she did about the whole affair. They knew nothing of the red-wigged gardener, of the vagrants, and of the rag baby. If only she had discovered them in the hut last night, no shadow of suspicion could then have been thrown upon Herr-Monsieur!

Oh! if only she could have caught the red-haired gardener and his wife! Peter said that there were two-sized footsteps, a large one and a smaller one; the large one belonged to the man and the smaller one to the woman. She must have been helping him last night. It was they who must have passed her in the furze.

These reflections brought Aggie to Chimney House. Once again she descended from her pony. The pony's flanks were steaming, for Aggie had ridden him fast.

She left the pony tethered to the gate, and went to the back entrance, for at this hour Mrs. Gale would be preparing breakfast in the kitchen.

Mrs. Gale saw Aggie passing by the window. She came out at once to greet her favourite.

"I want to see Herr-Monsieur this minute," Aggie said.

"The Count, you mean?" Mrs. Gale replied.

"Yes, yes," said Aggie, and she tapped the riding-whip she carried impatiently against her boot.

"But, dearie, you can't see him. He isn't down yet," Mrs. Gale replied.

"But I must see him," insisted Aggie. "It's fearfully important."

"Lovie, lovie!" remonstrated Mrs. Gale.

"Tell him I'm here," said Aggie. "Tell him that his *chère Mademoiselle* would have words with him."

"Indeed, you'll have to wait to pick your quarrel," Mrs. Gale replied.

"But it wasn't those kind of words I meant," said Aggie exasperated.

"Well, you can't have any kind of words with him until he's up and dressed; and it's seldom that he's up and dressed until nearly ten o'clock, besides——"

"But I shall be at lessons by ten. It'll be too late, too late, to—to——" She paused abruptly. She was about to have added, "to save Herr-Monsieur," when she recollected that Mrs. Gale might wish to know from what it was necessary to save her lodger.

Then Aggie bethought herself of writing.

She drew her precious notebook out of her pocket.

"If I give you a note," she inquired, "will you promise me most truly that it shall be taken up to him this very, very moment?"

Mrs. Gale was quite ready to accede to Aggie's wish, for she had feared that the dauntless and impatient Aggie might push past her, rush up the stairs and force an entrance into the Count's room.

There was no commencement to Aggie's letter, neither did she sign it; it was an anonymous com-

munication. She had no time to pick and choose her words; she was in far too great a hurry.

"*You were seen last night, and are suspected. The clock!*" she wrote.

Then she folded the letter into a little cocked hat. Having done so, she handed it to Mrs. Gale with repeated injunctions that she would herself, that very moment, convey the note to her distinguished guest.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A DISTURBING COMMUNICATION

Mrs. Gale had spoken quite correctly when she had said that Herr-Monsieur was not usually down before ten o'clock in the morning; but long before that time on this particular morning both Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui were up and dressed, for they had to complete the packing of their boxes. The carrier would call for them at an early hour. They themselves intended to leave somewhere about midday, for then the ferret and her friends would be safely at their lessons.

"Yes?" said Herr-Monsieur, as some one tapped on the door.

"A note; I have a note for you, sir, which I have been asked to deliver immediately."

"If Madame Gale would kindly leave it on the mat," said Herr-Monsieur drowsily, as if he were speaking from his bed.

Don Qui was folding up the workman's suits. He did not turn his head to listen as Herr-Monsieur and Mrs. Gale talked from either side of the closed door. He was never interested in any business save that on which he was engaged at the moment. Herr-Monsieur commanded, and Don Qui silently, but always implicitly, obeyed.

When Widow Gale had gone down-stairs, Herr-Monsieur went towards the door. He opened it slightly and took in the note.

"Who could be writing to him?" he wondered.

He sat on the bed, and unfolded the little cocked hat which Aggie had made. The writing was unfamiliar.

"Himmel!" he exclaimed. "Ach, Himmel!" he repeated. His face had become very white.

"I've had a warning," he exclaimed. "I do not know from whom it comes, but we are suspected. Listen to what it says—

"You were seen last night, and are suspected. The clock!"

"That," said Don Qui, "must mean we are suspected by the police."

"We must fly from here," Herr-Monsieur said. Even as he spoke he had taken from his purse the money to pay the bill which Mrs. Gale had presented, as they had requested, overnight.

In compensation for the short notice he had given her, he enclosed an additional week's rent. He put the money into an envelope, on which he wrote, "Called away unexpectedly to London. Kindly forward luggage to Paddington."

"But we go not to London," he added to himself.

Out of the box which Don Qui had packed so carefully, Herr-Monsieur began to pull the miscellaneous clothing they had brought back from the hut.

"These we must carry with us somehow or other," he announced. "There must be nothing which would incriminate us left in this trunk. Further," he added, "we must leave here in disguise. Into the workman's clothes we will change, in that little shanty where they store the turf at the foot of Combe Ridge. Every one is taking breakfast at this hour; it is our moment in which to escape. They will come and find their quarry fled. From whom comes the warning I have not yet had time to think. All I know is that we must flee from here, and that we must fetch Babette from the hut. Whosoever now is hunting for us is hunting for two foreign gentlemen. They will not look for us as rough-bearded workmen in the employ of Mr. Rogers, lodging at the Lonely Farm."

"How well it was we gave notice to Madame Gale last night."

Don Qui had packed the costumes, which Herr-Monsieur had thrown out from the trunk, into two large parcels. One of these he slung on to his shoulder; the other he handed to Herr-Monsieur.

Cautiously they went down-stairs. They had no mind to meet Mrs. Gale or any of her family.

Fortune favoured them. Mrs. Gale was attending to the farm breakfast in the kitchen. The parlour, which the strangers occupied, was deserted.

As they entered by the window on the previous evening, so they now left it, having once again looked cautiously round to be sure that no one was in sight.

Until they had reached the fields, they kept under

the shelter of the trees. There was no one abroad to see them come out into the open and walk across the meadow.

On the other side of the meadow, at the foot of Combe Ridge, on whose summit Combe Lodge stood, was the shanty. In this shanty stood the two large baskets filled with turf—the baskets which Aggie's friends, Peterson and Holland, had carried there the night before.

Herr-Monsieur's sharp eyes rested on the baskets. He closed the door of the shanty.

When Mr. Thomas Gale a little while later came out from his breakfast, he saw two men, who looked as though they might be tramps, carrying loads upon their shoulders. He sauntered slowly across the field and went into the shanty, the floor of which was strewn with turf.

"So the Commander has sent down more turf," he murmured to himself. "I wish he'd ask his men to pile it tidily, and not to chuck it on the floor anywhere."

Peter had ridden hastily from house to house collecting the Patrol. To each boy in turn he had confided the glorious news that the burglars were none other than Widow Gale's lodgers. The last house at which he called was Danger's.

The five boys, wearing their Scout hats, and carrying their staves in their hands, marched out of Combe Lodge. They had had no time to get into their uniforms.

At the head of the Patrol, Peter rode on horseback.

They were making their way quickly towards Chimney House. The men, so they decided, were to be locked into their room. Some of the Patrol were to be left on guard outside the locked door,

while Peter and the others were to go in search of the police.

As they turned out of Combe Lodge to march down the Ridge, they met two tramps struggling upwards. Each tramp carried on his shoulder a large basket filled, apparently, with turf. As the boys passed, each tramp in turn touched his cap to the Patrol.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE EMPTY NEST

Down Combe Hill the boys marched. Since Peter was mounted they did not cross the fields; they went round by the road. Peter did not recollect that he was breakfastless. He had been far too busy collecting the Patrol to consider such a trifle, for he had decided that this was work for the whole Patrol.

"I shall question the Count fellow myself," said Peter. "I shall inquire of him what were the contents of the bundle which he and his accomplice carried into Chimney House last night. This will be a grand day for the Scouts, and the Colonel will be proud of his Patrol."

"The audacity of the pair last night!" Peter writhed as he spoke. "I wish I had taken them red-handed. Yes, I do. I shall ring the front-door bell," he announced as soon as they were within sight of Chimney House. "I shall demand to be shown into the parlour, where I have no doubt we shall find the couple enjoying a comfortable breakfast

as though they were guiltless of the burglaries which have been committed."

"We oughtn't to let them know we're after them," Lambert suggested. "Wouldn't it be best if we were to creep up behind the rhododendron bushes, or they may hear us coming and think some one's after them, and cut away before we have a chance of capturing them."

Peter tethered his pony to the gate, just as Aggie had tethered hers some half an hour earlier. It was Peter who rang the front-door bell; he rang it loudly, and because it was not answered the moment that he rang it he pulled it again.

Down the stairs, carrying an opened letter in her hand, Widow Gale came hurrying. She had entered her guests' room, for she had found the door wide open, and on the table she had discovered the envelope addressed to herself.

Callers in the morning were unusual. This summons was so imperious that she had bundled her dirty apron underneath the table and had pulled down her sleeves, for Widow Gale when at work wore her sleeves rolled up above the elbow. It must be some grand folk to be ringing at her bell like that.

She opened the door full of trepidation. She opened it to find a group of boys waiting on the step.

"What did you go and ring like that for?" she began to scold; but Peter raised his hand majestically as though to command silence.

"Show us to Count Lorraine," he said; "show us this instant to Count Lorraine."

Widow Gale began to laugh.

"Indeed, Master Peter, but you do talk funny sometimes."

"Show us to Count Lorraine," Peter demanded for the third time.

"Show you to the Count!" echoed Mrs. Gale, "but how can I show you to the Count when the Count isn't here?"

"Isn't here!" said Peter. The boys looked in consternation from one to the other.

"Oh! I suppose," he said, grasping at a straw, "he's gone out for the day?"

"He's gone for good and all," said Mrs. Gale, and she tapped the letter which she held in her hand. "The two of them have gone to London."

"But why did you let them go?" said Peter; and he seized hold of Mrs. Gale by the arm, and began to shake her to and fro.

"Who was I to keep him?" Mrs. Gale replied as she dragged her arm out of Peter's grasp. "Him and his nice-spoken friend—they were called away on urgent business, and it's gentlemen they were, for they paid me every penny that they owed me, and more besides."

"Gentlemen!" shrieked Peter. "Burglars, villains, thieves, that's what they are."

What were they talking about? Of what were they accusing her nice guests? They did not know what they were saying. Boys never did. Mrs. Gale had an antipathy for boys.

"I'll have none of that, Master Peter," she said angrily. "You keep a decent tongue in your head, and mind what you're saying about respectable folk. There, get along. I've had quite enough of you and your nonsense. It's time you were at school. School's the best place for you, mark my words."

Before Peter and the Scouts had realized what had

happened, they found that the door had been slammed in their faces.

They rang and rang, for Peter was anxious to find out more particulars as to the whereabouts of the quarry they were seeking, for London was so vague. But ring as they would, hammer at the door as they would, scream as they would, Mrs. Gale, whom, in the momentary lulls they could hear humming to herself, took not the slightest notice of the uproar they were making.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE HAVOC OF THE STORM

Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui walked along as quickly as they could under the heavy loads which they were bearing on their shoulders, for in the baskets which they had so opportunely found in the shanty where they had decided to change, they had stored the suits they had been wearing at the moment, and those personal possessions which they were forced to carry with them, since they might have need of them on a future occasion. Over these possessions, to avoid suspicion, they had laid a thin layer of turf. The remainder of their luggage would be sent that day to London, they concluded, and there it might remain, in the Lost Property Office, until a convenient moment occurred for them to fetch it away. They had disguised themselves with heavy beards and thick eyebrows. Herr-Monsieur's beard was the longest, and his eyebrows were the bushiest. These eyebrows

reminded one rather of a tangled hedge, for they drooped down over his beady eyes which seemed to gleam out from behind the heavy growth. No one would have connected these two labourers, toiling up the hill, plodding along the road in the direction of Rexford, with the dapper foreigners, who, according to Mrs. Gale's account, had left for London that morning by the early train.

Along the road they walked for a very short distance; then they plunged into the woods at the point where B♯, Joan and Phyllis entered on the previous evening. They meant to fetch Babette from her secret home within the hidden hut. They meant to avoid that hut in the immediate future; to avoid, as far as possible, Ashleigh and the haunts of Scouts and "Spouts." From whom the warning they had received had come they could not tell. That it might be a hoax had occurred once to Herr-Monsieur. He had not dared to take the risk of ignoring it, however; and, after all, his original plans had been hastened only by some hours, for he had intended, all the while, as had been proved by the notice which he had given to Widow Gale overnight, to leave Chimney House that day. It did not suit his plans to stay over long in any dwelling-place. He had meant, whether the incident of the letter had occurred or no, to seek for lodging at the Lonely Farm, since its isolated position appealed to him exceedingly. He had intended that both he and Don Qui should for a little while take upon themselves the rôle of carpenters, that in those rôles they might perchance gain an entrance into Woodbourne.

For the last time they turned down the track which led to the hidden hut. The track was strewn with leaves which had been blown down in the recent storm.

How the wind whistled round Chimney House last night! Don Qui shivered as he thought of it.

They had reached the furze.

"It will be good to have Babette safely in our keeping once again," Herr-Monsieur murmured. And then suddenly he stood quite still. The basket which he had been carrying on his shoulders fell to the ground.

"What—what has happened?" Herr-Monsieur cried, with a voice that shook and lips that trembled. "The hut—where is the hut?"

He looked helplessly round him for the hut which he had left yesterday standing dilapidated but erect under the shadow of the elm tree.

Where was that elm tree now? It no longer towered aloft. The storm had done its work well in the wood. That massive tree, which had for so many years stood guardian to the hovel, had been torn up by its roots—had fallen upon its ward and had entirely demolished it.

Herr-Monsieur stood looking at the debris of the hut. It was but a ruin now, and in the heart of that ruin, beneath that fallen tree which he and Don Qui would be powerless to push aside by themselves, for it would need many hands to move it, Babette—Babette with the secrets stored in her breast—lay buried.

She was within a few yards of him, yet she was as inaccessible as if she had been transported during the night to the distant Polar regions.

Herr-Monsieur looked at Don Qui; Don Qui looked at Herr-Monsieur. Together they stood gazing at the havoc which the storm had wrought.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### SATISFACTORY REFERENCES

It had taken Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui, disguised as workmen, with all the immediate belongings which they needed packed into the turf baskets, some while to gain as much as an interview with the old miser at the Lonely Farm. They had prowled about the dilapidated place for a time, had hammered on the door until they were tired of hammering, and then, when they had really thought that they must give it up, a crabbed and yellow face had appeared at the window, and the owner of that face had shaken a bony fist menacingly at the intruders.

Herr-Monsieur, with great presence of mind, the moment he had caught sight of this wizened creature, had pulled a sovereign from his pocket, which he had held up between his finger and his thumb so that the sun might glint upon it and the miser see it sparkling. That sovereign was the key which opened not only the miser's heart to them, but what was more important yet, the door of his dwelling.

The face had disappeared from the window. The door which they had concluded to be the front door—although the bell had been torn down long since and the knocker was conspicuous by its absence—was opened very slowly. Through the aperture the yellow crinkled face had peered out. Herr-Monsieur, still holding the sovereign between his finger and his thumb, had explained his wants to the old niggard. He wanted a bedroom and a sitting-room for himself and his friend, who were about to work in Rexford. For

these rooms he was prepared to pay good money. At first, the miser had refused to come to terms, but the "good money" had proved too great an inducement. He had consented to let the rooms, provided that they were paid for in advance, and that the visitors undertook to regard his own privacy as sacred. That this should be the case Herr-Monsieur was eager to assure the miser.

"I'll not see you and you'll not see me from morning until night," the old man had cackled.

And Herr-Monsieur felt that the Lonely Farm was indeed the very haven he desired.

They had followed the miser into the house because he had beckoned them to do so. He would give them nothing but accommodation; they must do their own cooking—find their own provisions. The accommodation which he offered them was of the scantiest: a meagre and ill-furnished sitting-room; a bedroom whose bed was devoid of any covering save a soiled and tattered patchwork counterpane, and whose furniture comprised a broken washstand, a three-legged chair and an unpainted cupboard.

"It is no fine luxury ye'll get here," were the miser's parting words as, leaving his guests in possession of their new apartments, he had hurried away downstairs with the all too plentiful gold they had paid him clutched tightly in his hand.

Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui, having stored away their possessions in the unpainted cupboard, and turned the rusty key in the lock, which key Herr-Monsieur slipped into his pocket, left the Lonely Farm to walk to Rexford; not only to buy the provisions and supplementary equipment which they needed, but more important than all, to call at Rogers' to solicit the billets which they desired.

It was about half-past eleven when they presented themselves at the timber-yard. They were directed to a small shanty, in which they were told that they could see the manager, Mr. Buckley, as Mr. Rogers would not be back at the office until the following Monday morning.

It was Herr-Monsieur who, as usual, did all the talking. He spoke in a loud, cockney twang, and had it not been for the particularly warm recommendation which they had brought with them from the Colonel, Mr. Buckley was not quite sure if he would have engaged either of the men; for certainly the one who did the lion's share of the conversation seemed to be of an exceedingly common stamp. His friend, however, seemed distinctly more refined; and when once Mr. Buckley addressed him personally, and he was compelled to reply, the manager detected in his speech what he thought might be the trace of a foreign accent.

"What is your name?" Mr. Buckley asked of him.

"Bates, sir," the man replied. His companion had already given his as Wilson.

Mr. Buckley was sorry that Mr. Rogers was not at home to have decided definitely about engaging these two men. But the letter from Woodbourne—the letter speaking so highly of these applicants! Mr. Buckley was comforted with that letter, and he knew that, before all else, Mr. Rogers desired to please Colonel Norton.

Perhaps they would not agree to work at the wages he was about to offer them? In his heart of hearts he hoped that this would be the case. But no; they even said that the money offered was more than they had ever yet been paid; and for the privilege of being

in Mr. Rogers' workshop they would work for less wages than the other men received.

So what could Mr. Buckley do but engage them, recommended as they were by a client of high standing in the neighbourhood, a client who, moreover, had requested that any work to be done at Woodbourne should be done by these protégés of his ?

Thus Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui found themselves engaged, as they had wished, on a week's trial by the firm of Messrs. Rogers & Sons, Builders and Furniture Makers, Rexford.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### FRUSTRATION

It was the last class of the morning. It was a geography class.

Aggie had been getting into trouble. She had been inattentive at her lessons. Aggie, who was the brightest girl in the class, had frequently that morning been absolutely stupid. Poor Aggie ! She was suffering torture wondering what had happened to her friend Herr-Monsieur—wondering what had occurred at Chimney House. She was more determined than ever to visit the hut again that afternoon, as well as to identify the red-haired gardener with the Woodbourne burglar.

All that she knew so far was that the boys had marched down Combe Ridge to Widow Gale's. She had seen them on her way to school, for on Friday mornings the girls went to school half an hour earlier

than the boys, for they had a special nine o'clock drilling class.

Of course, Herr-Monsieur was not guilty! He had, no doubt, proved to the boys by this time that they were entirely mistaken in thinking that he and Don Qui had burgled Woodbourne. Would he have been amused, she wondered, that they could have thought it possible he could have done this thing? Or would he have been annoyed and vexed at the accusation laid upon him? Dear Herr-Monsieur!

"Aggie?" Twice had Miss Morecambe spoken to Aggie; but Aggie, far away in mind at Chimney House, had not realized that any one was addressing her. "If you do not answer my question this time," said Miss Morecambe severely, "you will be kept in. You are a most inattentive girl, and I am very displeased with you indeed."

"Kept in!" Aggie glanced towards the clock. She must not be kept in. Was she not to meet Danger at twenty minutes to one? She must regain that sash. Danger might know what had happened to Herr-Monsieur. Dared she ask him? She was afraid of the answer he would give her.

"Aggie, name the fauna of South Africa."

"Don Qui," began Aggie, unconsciously speaking her thoughts aloud.

"Donkeys!" said Miss Morecambe. "Donkeys, indeed! Agnes Phillips, of what are you thinking? Donkeys?" she said incredulously.

The question was passed to Aggie's next-door neighbour, who answered it satisfactorily.

"Good!" Miss Morecambe said. She continued to examine the class. It was Aggie's turn again.

But Aggie's mind was occupied with the Patrol she had seen marching down the hill.

"At least," Miss Morecambe was tapping on the desk with her ruler, "you can tell me the fauna of Great Britain, I conclude?"

Aggie started.

"Panthers," she began. If Herr-Monsieur was mistaken for the burglar, and arrested, then the boys would be able to furnish their room to receive the . .

"Agnes! Agnes!"

"Hyenas!" Aggie shrieked out, scarcely knowing what she was saying.

Then Miss Morecambe spoke very severely indeed. Too late, Aggie was recalled from her dreams of burglars, Herr-Monsieurs and Patrols, to the sterner reality of a geography lesson—to the yet sterner reality of a geography lesson to be relearned. For, with these words, Miss Morecambe had concluded the lecture she had read to her inattentive pupil: "You will stay in until one o'clock," she said, "and relearn your geography. In addition, you will write out, thirty times, 'I have been a very impertinent girl.'"

Stay in till one o'clock! Then she would miss her appointment. Until she had regained that sash, her mind would not be at rest. Danger would think she was a slackster. He would say that girls could not keep their word. Oh, why had she not attended to her lesson just for a very little while? Repentance came too late.

Then an idea occurred to Aggie. She would ask Ruth to meet Danger; to tell him that she had been kept in, and to ask him for the sash.

Once again, though, Miss Morecambe frustrated Aggie's plan. When the lesson came to its conclusion she did not leave the room. She sat on at her desk.

Aggie beckoned to Ruth. Ruth was about to approach her when Miss Morecambe intervened.

"No one is to speak to Agnes Phillips," she commanded. "Agnes Phillips is in disgrace. File out, girls."

And the girls filed out one by one. Only Aggie and Miss Morecambe were left in the schoolroom.

Aggie, trying to learn her geography, watched the girls run past the window on their homeward way. She saw them all go, all her friends, Ruth, Patty, B♯, Joan and Phyllis. It was twenty minutes to one. Even now Danger would be waiting with her sash.

"Agnes, I do not think that you are studying your lesson." Miss Morecambe had seen her turn and look out of the window. "You are to say that lesson to me quite perfectly at ten minutes to one."

Aggie bent over her book. She murmured to herself the fauna of South Africa. Of course, she had known it all the while. She had not been thinking, that was all. How could she think of silly geography when Herr-Monsieur was in peril?

At ten minutes to one, Aggie took her book to Miss Morecambe at the desk. She gave correct answers to every question. Then she went back to her seat. On a clean piece of paper she began to write out the imposition.

"I have been a very impertinent girl."

She dug the pen into the paper. She hadn't been an impertinent girl. Miss Morecambe wouldn't believe it, though, unless she gave an explanation; and she could not give an explanation, for her explanation would have involved Herr-Monsieur. It would have

disclosed the existence of the " Spouts "—all that was most private in Aggie's life.

How her hand ached when she scrawled, for the last time, that wearisome phrase !

She stretched out her arms, and shook her hair back. She took the imposition and laid it on Miss Morecambe's desk. Then she turned to hurry away. Perhaps Danger might have waited a few moments by the house ?

But Miss Morecambe called her back.

" A moment, Agnes."

Aggie stood there fidgeting, balancing herself first on one foot and then on the other, while Miss Morecambe read through, line by line, the task which Aggie had accomplished.

" You might have saved yourself a good deal of trouble," she said as she tore the paper in two, " if you had been attentive in class."

" I know," said Aggie quickly, " but I was thinking of something else."

" You have plenty of time," said Miss Morecambe, " out of school to think of other things. Understand that, for the future, when you are in class I expect—in fact, I request you to think of nothing but your work."

" May I go ? " gasped Aggie hastily, as Miss Morecambe paused.

" You may go," said Miss Morecambe, " but perhaps it would be as well if you were to listen patiently another time to what I have to say."

But Aggie did not hear these parting injunctions. At the words " You may go," she had fled from the room.

She took her hat down from off the peg, and crushed it on to her head.

Up the road she ran from the Willows to Woodbourne. But there was no Danger standing waiting by the gate. There was no Danger anywhere in sight!

## CHAPTER XXIX

### COMPLETE DEADLOCK

AGGIE had not a chance of speaking privately to Peter until after lunch. Then it was only with the greatest difficulty that she could get a word with him, for he was hurrying off to "footer," and did not want to be delayed. He was in the schoolroom looking for his sweater.

So that he might not leave the room, Aggie stood with her back against the door. She did not mean to let him pass until she had found out all she wished to know.

"Well," she said, "what happened?"

"What happened when, where?" asked Peter.

"Happened this morning, of course," she retorted. "Did Herr-Monsieur laugh at your suspicions and call you a silly lot of boys, or was he annoyed with you or what?"

"He wasn't anything," said Peter.

"Of course, I knew that you were wrong!" Aggie cried triumphantly.

"He wasn't anything," continued Peter, "because we didn't see him!"

"Ah! Mrs. Gale told me that he always had his breakfast late."

"Told you when?" asked Peter sharply.

"Oh, sometime," said Aggie evasively.

"If I didn't think it was quite impossible I should believe that you had warned them."

"I haven't seen either of them," responded Aggie truthfully, "since yesterday afternoon."

"Well, I don't know how it happened," Peter continued, "but somehow or other they must have got wind of the fact that they were suspected, for, early as we were, we found them flown; they had already left for London."

"Left for London?" cried Aggie. She was breathing quickly. She was really startled by Peter's words. "You say they've left?" she repeated.

"Yes," said Peter moodily. "They've left. London is a safe enough place to hide in. I don't suppose we shall ever hear of them again. Now, do you believe they're guilty or not? What's more," he continued gloomily, "I've asked the 'Hyenas' to tea to-morrow week, to celebrate the furnishing of our Club Room. Nice celebration that'll be! I asked them this morning, because I made sure I had the burglars in the hollow of my hand. And now we're no nearer having that furniture than we were a week ago. A nice report we shall have to write for Monday's meeting! We shall only be able to tell the Colonel we have failed. As a matter of fact, he must know that already, for we met him in the village, and we tried to tell him, but he only said that he hadn't time to listen; that unless we'd actually found the burglars' whereabouts he didn't want to hear a thing till Monday.

"Much chance we have of finding their whereabouts! The leaders have gone to London. The gang, I

suppose, has been disbanded. They'll live on that booty for a little while, then, when their funds are exhausted, they'll make a raid somewhere else. So this is the end of the burglar hunt," said Peter as, throwing the sweater on to his back and knotting the sleeves round his neck, he went out of the door which Aggie no longer barricaded.

But Aggie was none too sure that this was the end of the burglar hunt. It bothered her a little that Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui should have departed in such haste, departed immediately, so it appeared, on receipt of her letter. But it mattered really very little, for, in the burglar hunt in which she was engaged, Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui played no part. All her hope was pinned on the hut and upon its strange occupants.

Peter having left for "footer," Aggie put on her hat to go to Ruth's.

It had been arranged on the previous evening that she and Ruth should watch the hut from three to five; and that Patty and Joan should take their turn from five to seven o'clock. At half-past seven all the girls were wanted at the Willows for the dress rehearsal of the theatricals that were to take place on the following evening.

Aggie must tell Ruth all that she had gleaned from Peter. She told her as they walked from Ruth's house to the woods.

"Of course, it must be only a coincidence, the departure of the strange guests from Chimney House; but it is funny that they should have gone early like that—directly they received my note."

"It certainly is funny," Ruth agreed. "If it wasn't for the vagrant and his wife, the rag doll

and the hut in the wood, I must say I should be inclined to think myself that they had taken the clock."

But Aggie was quite indignant with Ruth for having even suggested such a thing.

"Fancy any one like Herr-Monsieur stealing!" she said.

They had reached the Oak Tree. Long before it was necessary, Aggie tiptoed through the bushes and placed her finger on her lips to call for silence. She was quite sure that her quarry would sometime during the afternoon either leave or approach the hut.

She looked up. She was close beside the furze. She had marked down the hut by means of the great elm tree, which, even in the darkness, she had been able to discern on the previous night. Now she could see no sign of the tree. She pushed on a little further, and then, just as Herr-Monsieur had stopped suddenly, so Aggie stopped also. She had come face to face with the demolished hovel.

"It—it must have happened in the night," Ruth said. "The tree must have been blown down in the gale."

"If they were sleeping in the hut——"

Half fearfully, Aggie went up to examine the debris; but among that debris there was no sign of anything to make her believe that the occupants had suffered in the downfall.

"They did not sleep here last night," she announced. "Perhaps they returned this morning to find their home in ruins, and so departed elsewhere?"

"Perhaps, said Ruth sagaciously, "they came last

night, and finding Babette gone, believed they were discovered, so fled."

"Well, it matters little either way," said Aggie, "for owing to the demolishing of the hut we have lost all clue as to the whereabouts of the robbers."

## CHAPTER XXX

### AN UNPROVOKED ASSAULT

Aggie had a great deal to worry about. She and Ruth on their way home had called first at Patty's, then at Joan's, to tell them their watch would be in vain, and to relate the sad story of the utter demolition of the hidden hut.

Aggie knew not what to do now. Where should they hunt next for the burglars? As the Scouts were at a deadlock, so were the "Spouts." Unless anything occurred during the next two days to give her a fresh clue, she too must announce a failure at the meeting on Monday, which she had made up her mind she and her Patrol should attend. After all they had discovered, it was too bitterly disappointing to be baulked like this when they had actually been on the verge of solving the whole mystery. Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui had gone away; the hut no longer existed; her sash had not yet been recovered.

No wonder that, as she sat disconsolate on the window-seat (for she had refused to "tea" with Ruth —she had not been in the mood to "tea" with any one) she felt really troubled, really unhappy in her

mind. Perhaps at the moment she was more worried over the missing sash than anything else. Owing to an unforeseen catastrophe, she had failed to meet Danger that morning as she had arranged. She must now, she decided, make a second appointment; so little time remained before the following evening, when her aunt would come expecting to see her wear the lost sash at the theatricals.

She slipped down from the window-seat, quite slowly, and went towards her desk.

The second letter, she determined, she would deliver herself at Combe Lodge, to insure its getting into Danger's hands as early as possible.

"DEAR DANGER," she began—

"Awfully sorry I didn't keep the 'app.' this morning; got kept in at school, worse luck! I'll meet you outside Woodbourne at eight to-night, if you'll be nice enough to bring me round the sash on your way back from the Club Room. Peter said this morning you'd got a meeting about something, at seven. It wouldn't be frightfully out of your way to come to Woodbourne, would it? Peter never comes that way, he always cuts across the fields.

"Yours,

"AGGIE."

"PS.—Remember, as before, mum's the word to Peter!"

No sooner had Aggie finished this note than she scampered down the stairs. She felt happier in her mind now. A moment or two before she had felt that she could never scamper in her life again.

"Going out, darling?" said her mother as Aggie passed the drawing-room door, which stood wide open.

"For a moment or two," Aggie answered.

"I wonder if you would go to Chimney House?" her mother asked.

"To Chimney House?" said Aggie very quickly.

"Yes, I want Mrs. Gale to send me a nice goose for to-morrow's dinner. Your Aunt Margaret is dining with us, you recollect, as she is going to your theatricals."

Poor Aggie! Was it likely that she could forget her aunt was coming to those theatricals?

"By the way," her mother continued, "it's your dress rehearsal to-night, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's at half-past seven," Aggie answered. "Awful fudge!" she continued. "I come on at half-past seven for about two minutes, then I'm not wanted again till nearly half-past eight."

"At what time will the rehearsal be over?" said her mother.

"Oh, about ten, I suppose, Mummie," Aggie answered.

"Pearson shall fetch you in the car; mind you wrap up warmly," Mrs. Phillips added. "You're walking down with the others, I suppose? It's been so showery lately that I should put on your brown raincoat. Be sure to tell Mrs. Gale to send the goose early to-morrow afternoon," was her mother's parting injunction, as Aggie, with her letter in her hand, hurried out of doors.

She had determined that she would go first of all to Combe Lodge, then cut across the fields to Chimney House.

The windows of Combe Lodge overlooked the road, down on to which its front-door steps led.

Aggie, who had run all the way from her own house, was about to mount these steps. She looked cautiously around her. There was no one in sight. Then, quite unexpectedly, she found herself being pelted with brushes, combs, stockings rolled up into balls—with anything, in fact, upon which the occupants of the window, under which she had paused, could lay their hands.

Aggie looked up quickly. Plop on to her face came a large sponge full of cold water.

Aggie shook it off. The water was dripping down her neck.

"Wish I'd brought my raincoat with me now," she murmured to herself.

Two faces, convulsed with laughter, appeared at the window. The faces belonged to Peter and to Danger.

"Cowards!" said Aggie promptly, as, still roaring with laughter, they pointed to the debris at her feet.

As soon as she had caught sight of Peter, she had hidden the note in the pocket of her frock; the sponge she still held behind her back.

"What are you doing there?" she asked of Peter.

"I'm up in Danger's room," he responded.

"Obvious, that," said Aggie. For the brushes and the stockings with which she had been assaulted had all been marked with the name of Alec Tylston.

"Where off to, Pickle-jar?" he asked.

"That's my own affair, Pea-eater!" she retorted. "Well, if you want to know," she added—it had occurred to her perhaps Peter might have thought

she was about to call at Danger's—" I'm going across the fields to order a goose at Chimney House."

" Shouldn't have thought you need have gone as far as that for it ! " said Peter, cackling with laughter.

Aggie never smiled. From behind her back she drew the sponge, still full of water.

" What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander ! " she retorted, as she flung the dripping sponge right up into Peter's face, then fled up the road as hard as she could run.

The sponge landed in Peter's eye. He made a grab at it but failed to catch it. Back again it fell, but it did not reach the ground, for, out of the door at that minute walked Mr. Tylston, Danger's stern parent. In his hand he was carrying his hat. The sponge landed on his head !

Angrily he looked up to the window, the window in which Peter and Danger were still standing.

" You threw this sponge at me ? You dared to joke with me ? " He was pointing angrily at Danger.

" Indeed, it was all my fault," said Peter, interposing hastily on his friend's behalf.

" Your fault ! " stormed Mr. Tylston, still furiously angry. " Six of one, and half a dozen of the other, that's what it is ! Six of one and half a dozen of the other ! What business have you to throw anything out of your window at all ? " And he pointed to the collection lying on the pathway. " Phillips, you can go home this minute; and you, Alec, will go supperless to bed at eight o'clock ! "

. . . . . .

Aggie went straight from Danger's to Chimney House. All the time she had been crossing the fields

she had been thinking of Herr-Monsieur, because Chimney House, to her, was closely connected with Herr-Monsieur.

Five times she hammered on the back door with her knuckles. But no one came to let her in.

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Gale was up-stairs tidying the room which had been so recently occupied by the foreign guests; and the remainder of the occupants of the farm were out.

Aggie, having failed to get any response at the back door, went round to the front. But here, too, she met with ill success, for though she kept ringing and ringing until she thought she must have broken the bell no one responded to her summons.

At length, the window of a room overhead was thrown open, and out of that window a head appeared. It was Mrs. Gale's.

"Oh! it's you, Miss Aggie?" she exclaimed.

"Of course it's me!" said Aggie a little aggrievedly. Why had she been kept ringing and knocking all this time, she wondered?

"I thought it was them boys back again to worrit the life out of me with all their silly questions. I won't hear a word against them, no, I won't. They left like honourable gentlemen, though they hadn't time to say good-bye. They were called off in a hurry, and they paid every farthing that they owed me, and more besides. I'm a-coming down, Miss Aggie. I'm a-coming down."

Mrs. Gale withdrew her head, and Aggie heard her stumping down the stairs and coming towards the door.

Since the morning invasion, Mrs. Gale had locked and bolted the front door from the inside. All these

locks and bolts had now to be unfastened to admit Aggie.

"Come in, Miss Aggie! Come in!" Mrs. Gale exclaimed as she threw the door wide open.

"I'm afraid I haven't time to come in," Aggie said. "You see, I'm fearfully busy to-night. It's the dress rehearsal of our theatricals."

"I'm coming to see you to-morrow night, Miss Aggie," Mrs. Gale said with a smile. "It'll be good to see you performing. And have you a lot of words to speak?"

"Not much," said Aggie. "I'm fifth 'hurrah!' in the crowd."

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Gale appreciatively, "you mustn't be forgetting your lines. I'd be shaking and trembling all over if I was a-going to take part in theatricals!"

"You'll clap when I come on," said Aggie, "won't you?"

"Of course I will," said Mrs. Gale. "And I'll bring Thomas with me to clap too. I heard him making a rare lot of noise, stamping and clapping, when they had the meeting about putting up the Mayor of Rexford's statue, him being a local man, in memoriam of our late King Edward. My nephew's coming from Rexford too, all the way from Rexford, Miss. He's Alfred, you know, my sister Annie's son."

"What's that you've got in your hand?" inquired Aggie; for while Mrs. Gale had been talking to her, she had kept looking down surreptitiously at some paper she was holding.

"It's just a little souvenir of him I'm keeping," Mrs. Gale explained.

"Of Macaroon?" said Aggie promptly.

"'Deed no, Miss Aggie. What should I be doing with a souvenir of Mr. McAron, when he comes down here twice a week to fetch the Colonel's eggs? Mondays and Thursdays are his afternoons," said Mrs. Gale, with conscious satisfaction. "It's a souvenir," she concluded, "of the dear Count. Perhaps you didn't know that he was fond of drawing? Often and often I've gone into his room and found him doing sketches. He left this in his drawer. I'm going to have it framed for the parlour, in memory of him." And Mrs. Gale showed Aggie the little drawing she was holding in her hand. "He must have done it in the woods," she said; for the drawing she held out was a sketch of Woodbourne seen at a distance through the trees.

"I never knew he drew," said Aggie. "That's what he must have meant, she decided at once, "when he talked about his important work."

"So the boys came here this morning?" Aggie volunteered next.

"Making a dreadful noise they were, too," Mrs. Gale exclaimed. "Trying to make believe that the nice Count had run away because he'd done something wicked! As if he hadn't given me notice," said Mrs. Gale aggrievedly, "just as any gentleman would have given me notice, last night!"

"He gave you notice last night?" said Aggie.

"He did, Miss Aggie. He said he'd have to be leaving in the morning."

"Said last night he'd have to be leaving in the morning," Aggie repeated hurriedly. A great load had been lifted from her mind. If Herr-Monsieur had arranged to go overnight her note had not, after all, been responsible for his hasty flight.

"Well, I must be off now," she said. "And you won't forget to clap me to-morrow?"

"I'll not forget to clap you," Widow Gale said reassuringly. "It's you that I'm coming to see, Miss Aggie, and no one else."

"Oh, Mrs. Gale! Oh, Mrs. Gale!" said Aggie, and she waggled her finger in a reproving way. "I'm sure that you told Ruth and Patty just the same thing."

But Mrs. Gale assured Aggie most earnestly that she had not done so.

As Aggie turned away, she gave one last lingering look back towards the room which had been so recently occupied by Herr-Monsieur and his friend.

"I wish I'd known Herr-Monsieur sketched before," she said. "If he'd only been coming to our performance to-morrow night, he might have done a drawing of our play—of me, shouting that fifth 'hurrah,' in my white muslin dress, and—oh!——" Aggie paused abruptly. "I came down here to order a goose for Aunt Margaret's dinner, and if I haven't forgotten all about it!"

She turned round and ran back towards the house.

"Mrs. Gale, Mrs. Gale!" she cried out. Widow Gale was still standing on the threshold. "Mother wants you to send her a nice goose for to-morrow night's dinner. She says that you are to be sure to let her have it in the early afternoon. And, oh! Mrs. Gale,"—Aggie had taken Danger's note from her pocket—"might one of the farm hands leave this letter at Combe Lodge on his way home? Dick Allen passes by the house, doesn't he? And would you please ask him to leave it there before seven o'clock?"

## CHAPTER XXXI

### A LAST ATTEMPT

Aggie had gone down to say "good-bye" to her mother. She had buttoned her brown raincoat over her dress, as she did not want Mrs. Phillips to see that she was not wearing the red sash.

"I hope you'll have a nice evening, dearest," said her mother as she kissed Aggie good-bye; "and be sure not to hurt your beautiful sash before your Aunt Margaret sees it to-morrow night. I've told Pearson to fetch you at ten o'clock," she added.

"Thank you ever so much, Mummie," Aggie cried as she ran off quickly, for she knew that Ruth and Patty would be waiting for her at the gate. She was not wrong in her surmise. Both Ruth and Patty were waiting for her in the road. All chattering together they hurried towards the school. For once they were not talking of the burglaries, but of the forthcoming theatricals. The play in which they were taking part was the *Babes in the Wood*.

"I know Sylvia's part through, word for word," said Aggie grandly. "I'd love to play her part better than any in the play."

"You couldn't play Sylvia's part," said Patty smartly, "because you haven't got short hair as she has."

"Well, my hair's shorter than anybody else's," Aggie answered as though it was something to be proud of, "except Sylvia's, of course," she added quickly. It was owing to her short hair that Sylvia

had been cast for the part of the Boy Babe, a part which Aggie envied greatly.

"Do you know what bit I love the best?" she chattered on; "I love the bit where Sylvia comes in first, dragging Joan's doll by the arm, and Joan comes rushing in and tries to get the doll from Sylvia, and tells her that she's a horrid naughty boy."

They had reached the school. They left their hats and coats piled one on top of the other in the lobby, and hurried to the playroom, where a temporary stage had been erected.

Of all the cast, they were the last to arrive with the exception of Sylvia Brunt.

Girls in plain dresses and girls in fancy dresses were standing together in groups. Then Miss Morecambe, who was superintending the rehearsal, banged sharply on a gong.

"We cannot wait for Sylvia any longer," she exclaimed, "we must begin without her."

The scene opened with some village children dancing and singing on a green. Aggie was among these children. Once she had sung her song and danced her dance she would not be wanted again for three quarters of an hour, since she had no part in the nursery scene which followed. This was Aggie's favourite scene, for it opened with the doll scrimmage in which she so delighted.

It was during the three quarters of an hour interval that she had arranged to meet Danger outside Woodbourne. Alas! she did not know the sad sequel to the sponge episode, for Peter had by no means returned home as Mr. Tylston had commanded. He had gone straight to the Club Room for the evening's camp-fire yarn.

She did not know that Danger had been banished to bed! She tripped away from the Willows and went towards Woodbourne. She had not stopped to put on a coat, and she ran only in her thin muslin dress. She waited under the shadow of the trees where she had arranged that Danger should meet her. There was no Danger there. She was a little early for the appointment, she recollected. It was quite dark. She fancied she heard a movement, coming, as it were, from the back gate. There was a rustling among the trees.

"Danger, Danger," she called very softly.

Then the rustling seemed to grow further away.

"Danger, Danger." She had raised her voice.

Two artisans standing a few yards away from where she waited, completely hidden by the trees, moved out on to the road. She no longer heard the trees rustling. Had Danger come and gone away again?

"Danger, Danger," she called more loudly than before.

The artisans, both bearded men with bushy eyebrows, looked from one to the other. What was this eerie warning coming to them through the darkness? the second warning which they had received that day. "Danger, danger," they repeated to themselves; and they walked stealthily away from Woodbourne.

They walked as though they had come from far and were tired. They had tramped a very long way indeed. From Rexford to Woodbourne, past the Lonely Farm, was a wearisome and tedious journey.

Aggie waited and waited until she dared to wait no longer. So, disappointed once again, she went back to the Willows.

As soon as she re-entered the playroom, she was surrounded by a group of girls.

"We've been hunting for you everywhere," Ruth said. "Miss Morecambe sent us to look for you, but you weren't in the lobby or in any of the schoolrooms."

"You did look well!" said Aggie evasively.

Beyond the fact that her cheeks were rather pink, and her hair rather blown about, no one could have guessed that anything untoward had happened.

"But what are you all agitating about?" she continued. "I don't come on yet for ages!"

"Oh! but Miss Morecambe wants you to take Sylvia's part for this evening. Sylvia has a bad cold, and is saving up for to-morrow. Her mother has just written to tell Miss Morecambe. Miss Morecambe was rather worried about to-night's rehearsal, so we told her that you knew the part word for word. You're to be the Boy Babe for to-night." It was Patty who made this announcement.

"Is that Aggie?" Miss Morecambe asked from the platform. "Dear child," she said, "where had you hidden yourself?"

"Oh, I was only all over the place," said Aggie vaguely.

"We were waiting for you to begin the second act. No, you haven't time to change," she said, as Aggie made a movement towards the dressing-room. "You must play the part just as you are. You must use this for the doll," and Miss Morecambe thrust a cushion into Aggie's hands.

"We're going to start now," she said. "Is everybody ready? Come along, Joan. You can talk to Phyllis afterwards."

"One, two, three," counted Miss Morecambe. On the "three," she rang up the curtain on the famous nursery scene.

Across the stage Aggie ran, dragging the make-believe doll along the floor. In hot pursuit Joan followed, eager to regain her plaything.

. . . . . .

The rehearsal was at an end. Aggie was the last to leave the school, for Miss Morecambe had detained her long after the others to congratulate her upon her excellent performance.

"I feel quite sorry," she had said, "that you're not playing the part to-morrow night."

"Oh! but I couldn't have done so," Aggie explained, "because of my hair."

"Oh! that difficulty could have been easily overcome," Miss Morecambe responded with a smile. "If Sylvia fails to appear, we shall know to whom to turn."

With these words she dismissed Aggie, who went down to the lobby to find that all her friends had departed. She had been so absorbed in playing her new part that she had forgotten until that moment her fruitless journey to Woodbourne. Her ill success to regain the sash now fretted her once more. If she were not to see Danger upon the following day, what should she do? Must she spend another night of suspense? It was horrible. She knew where Danger slept. She might drive home past his house. She would tell Pearson she had a message to deliver. He must wait for her round the corner. She would tell him she wouldn't be a minute, for she would just pelt the window with hard bits of mud and wake him up, and then she could ask him to throw her out the sash.

For once, Fortune favoured Aggie. At the corner round which she had not wished Pearson to drive, the car of its own accord came to a standstill. Pearson got down from his seat.

"What's wrong?" said Aggie, poking her head out of the window.

"Something's happened, Miss," Pearson answered, his head buried in the bonnet.

"Oh! well," said Aggie quite unconcernedly, "while you're putting things right, I'll go and deliver that message which I told you I had to leave at Combe Lodge."

Aggie did not wait for Pearson to say "yea" or "nay." As a matter of fact, Pearson was too absorbed in setting things right to notice what his young mistress was about.

Aggie wrapped her brown coat tightly round her, and ran as quickly as she could up the Ridge.

Before Combe Lodge she paused, and began to grovel on the ground for mud with which to make the pellets; and having provided herself with sufficient ammunition, in order to take a better aim she balanced herself on the railings which surrounded Combe Lodge. Ever since she had been a tiny child Aggie had always been able to throw straight. Pellet after pellet rattled against Danger's window, but never a sound came from within, although the pellets had quite successfully wakened Danger. He lay clutching feverishly at the bed-clothes. The burglars—the leaders, no doubt, of that ferocious gang, with whom he had no wish to have another encounter, were trying to force an entry into his room!

Once again Aggie took aim. She nearly overbalanced. Her coat caught on a spike of the railings,

which tore a jagged hole in the cloth. On the spike, a piece of brown material was left hanging.

Aggie made one more desperate effort. Danger was the soundest sleeper she had ever come across. Thud! went the last pellet on the window of the bedroom. It was three times the size of its predecessors.

Danger turned from hot to cold. His heart beat quickly. He buried his head on the pillow.

"Come along now, Miss Aggie." Some one was tapping Aggie on the shoulder. That some one was Pearson.

Aggie moved a step or two away. Danger in his bed heard the muffled sound of voices, for Aggie had lowered her voice to speak to Pearson.

"Won't it go?" she said.

"It won't budge, Miss!" he answered.

Pearson's words floated up to Danger's room.

The wretches had been trying to open the dining-room window, he presumed. They had found it wouldn't budge. Again he heard the murmuring of voices.

Pearson and Aggie had gone a little further away. Pearson was telling Aggie that they must walk home; that, in her absence, he had found a man to watch beside the car. Once he had delivered her safely at the White House, he would return with the tools he needed to put the machinery in order.

What were the ruffians planning now? Danger thought to himself in a frenzy. Perhaps they were planning to climb up and enter through his window. The very notion of such a thing petrified him with fright. Then, quite suddenly, he sat up in bed. "He wouldn't be a coward!" he determined. "A

Scout to be frightened of burglars!" His knees shook under him as he crept out of bed. His heart was in his mouth.

He felt his way to the table in the centre of the room on which a candle stood. But alas! in that candlestick there were no matches. He fumbled about for them.

"Come, come," said Pearson, and he raised his voice, because Aggie seemed strangely disinclined to hurry; "we can't be waiting any longer!"

Danger started. He heaved a great sigh of thankfulness. They had decided it was of no avail to try to enter the house.

Aggie followed Pearson round the corner, and Danger heard the footsteps dying away in the distance. As he did so, quite unexpectedly his hand knocked against the matches. He struck a light. Then he went towards the fire-place and took the poker from the grate. He threw the window wide open, and looked up and down the road. There was no soul in sight!

## CHAPTER XXXII

### HOPE REVIVED

PETER had scarcely finished breakfast in the morning before Danger had arrived. He was scarlet in the face with excitement, and he dragged Peter out of doors, away from everybody else, because he said that he had something most fearfully important to tell him.

Peter rather grumbled at not having time for a second helping of honey. But Danger said that Peter wouldn't think of honey any more when he'd heard what he'd to say about his adventures.

"They're still in the neighbourhood!" he exclaimed breathlessly when they had reached the bottom of the lawn.

"Who?" said Peter.

"The burglars!" Danger cried. "Those foreign chaps, though they left Chimney House, didn't leave the neighbourhood, so it seems. They tried last night to burgle our place. They tried to get in through my window."

"Get in through your window?" Peter said.

He was all eyes and ears. If the burglars were still in the neighbourhood of Ashleigh, they might be captured by the Scouts—captured by Monday afternoon. The Club Room might, after all, be furnished in time to receive the "Hyenas."

"Didn't they get into the house?" Peter asked.

"No," said Danger. "I frightened them away. The moment that I heard them I got out of bed. I seized hold of the poker. I flew to the window and flung it wide open. As I did so, I heard the cowards shuffling away into the darkness."

"How many were there?" Peter asked. "Weren't you in time to catch sight of them?"

"No," Danger owned. "It was too dark, anyway. But there were two of them, of that I am quite certain. I heard them talking the one to the other, and this morning there were marks of two footprints—one large and one small one—underneath my window."

"It's them again, without a doubt!" said Peter.

" It's the leaders from Chimney House. They didn't go to London after all, or if they did go, they've returned. We've got to track them down between now and Monday, and when we've successfully tracked them down there'll be no more burglaries, mark my words, in Ashleigh ! "

" Hadn't you better come down to my place now and look for ' sign ' ? " said Danger.

Peter nodded his head in assent. And the two boys made off as quickly as they could towards Combe Lodge.

Aggie, watching from the schoolroom window, wondered where these two could be going to in such a hurry. If only she could have got Danger by himself and asked him about the sash !

So far, he hadn't taken the slightest notice of the two letters she had written him, and this worried her extremely.

Outside Combe Lodge, Peter and Danger stood just where Aggie had stood on the previous night.

" And they were standing underneath your window when you heard them first ? " said Peter.

" I woke up to hear a kind of fumbling at my window, as though somebody was trying to force it open."

" But," said Peter, " if somebody had actually clambered on to the sill they wouldn't have had time to get down before you had thrown it open."

" Oh, but before I threw it open," exclaimed poor Danger, who had turned rather pink, " I had to light the candle to fetch the poker. It was the sudden appearance of the light, I suppose, that frightened them away."

" They must have been pretty smart," said Peter.

"Oh, but they were," said Danger hastily. "They were very smart indeed."

"It was after they had got down from the window that you heard their voices?"

"Yes," said Danger. "It took rather a time to light the candle, because I couldn't find the matches."

"You seem to have muddled affairs pretty well!" said Peter crossly.

"I muddled affairs?" cried Danger, with the air of an injured hero. "I'd like to have seen you attacking a pair like that without a weapon; and how could I find the poker in the dark?"

But Peter wasn't listening to Danger. After all, it mattered little what he had done: the important fact was that the burglars had made an attempt to enter the house, and, since they had made this attempt they must still be in the district. Besides—Peter had at that moment come across something which was interesting him exceedingly. He put his hand over it. It was hanging to an iron spike.

"Look here!" he said, and he turned to Danger. "Can you tell me what coloured suit that fellow called Lorraine wore?"

"It was a kind of browny suit," Danger answered promptly.

"Right!" said Peter quickly. He lifted his hand from off the iron spike, and revealed what he was hiding beneath it. It was a tiny scrap of brown tweed. It was so small a piece that no definite pattern could be traced on it.

"It's brown," said Danger. He was eyeing it closely.

"And Lorraine's is brown!" said Peter triumph-

antly. "Lorraine was here last night. It was Lorraine who climbed up to your sill—who caught his coat on the spike. It was Lorraine and his friend who tried to burgle your house last night. If only," he continued, holding the piece of stuff which he had taken from the spike very carefully between his finger and his thumb, "we could trace Lorraine by means of this!"

"It will be difficult," said Danger. "We might do it if we had a bloodhound?" he suggested.

"A bloodhound?" said Peter very quickly. Then he stopped to think.

"I only know of one person," Danger said, "who has a bloodhound."

"Who?" said Peter.

"The old fellow at the Lonely Farm."

"That old horror!"

"He's keen on money," said Danger thoughtfully. "If we 'Panthers' all subscribed now——"

Exultantly, Peter thumped Danger on the back.

"You're a treasure and a brick!" he cried. "It's jolly little we could raise, but perhaps we could manage one-and-sixpence between us. He's such an old stinger that he might loan us the dog for one-and-sixpence. Anyway, if we can get the funds together we'll have a try, I vote. We'll go to the Lonely Farm to borrow the old miser's bloodhound for a day. Then we'll bring him here, and give him this piece of stuff to sniff." Peter had laid the piece of stuff flat upon his hand.

"As sure as my name is Peter Phillips, that sagacious beast will track down the nocturnal visitor who left this handsome souvenir hanging to the spike last night!"

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### A STROKE OF LUCK

"HERE'S a note for you, Miss Aggie." Nannie came bustling into the schoolroom.

Aggie, who had finished her lunch, was sitting rather despondently on the window-seat. She and Peter had agreed to ride that afternoon; but Peter, at the last moment, had put her off, saying that he had urgent business on hand. He had spoken in a very mysterious way, and all through luncheon he had seemed silent and preoccupied. The moment he had finished he had dashed off, and Aggie knew that she would not see him again until tea-time.

"Hutchinson, from Combe Lodge, brought it," Nannie explained. "It should have come last night," she said, "but it was forgotten. She is very sorry indeed, and hopes it wasn't important."

Aggie was too eager to read the contents of that note to give any reply to Nannie. And Nannie left Aggie tearing the note open on the schoolroom window-seat.

The note, of course, was from Danger. Aggie would rather that it had been a bulky parcel. Perhaps it was to tell her to call at Combe Lodge for the sash. Perhaps Danger did not dare to send the sash direct, lest Peter should discover that he had done so.

As she read that note, Aggie's face fell.

"DEAR AGGIE," Danger had written—

"Sorry I can't meet you. Peter has put an obstacle in the way. Can't imagine why you should

think a boy would have a sash. I haven't such a thing in my possession ! "

" Yours, till the sea dries up,
" DANGER."

Danger hadn't got her sash. If Danger hadn't got it, who had then ? It was maddening ! She would never be able to find it before that evening.

At luncheon she had heard her mother order the car for three o'clock. She was going into Rexford to do a little shopping. If she, Aggie, had only had some money, she might have done a little shopping on her own account. She might have bought a new red sash so that the loss of the one her aunt had sent her might not be discovered.

All the morning she had been trying to crush down a tiny hope which had arisen within her, for she knew that it was a mean, uncharitable hope. Her hope had been that Sylvia's cold would be too bad for her to play her part that evening, and that she, Aggie, would be asked to play it. Then there would be no need for her to wear a sash at all. But she would have heard before this if such had been the case.

The idea of replacing the lost sash had only come into her head that very afternoon. How did people who were hard up get money ? she reflected. Sometimes they sold things—their clothes, their jewellery. She couldn't sell her clothes; they were not her own. Her jewellery ? There was that little gold brooch she had once bought out of her own money. She might sell that, because it was her very, very own; because she didn't care for jewellery any more. If she were to take that brooch to Green, the nice kind jeweller in the High Street, perhaps he would give

her two-and-sixpence for it? A new sash would cost about two shillings and sixpence she supposed.

She went out of the schoolroom into her bedroom. In her jewel-case, in its little cardboard nest, rarely ever opened, the gold brooch lay. It was all the jewellery that Aggie possessed save a coral necklace and a silver initial bangle. The necklace and the bangle she couldn't sell because they had been presents. She felt not the slightest regret at parting with the brooch.

She heard her mother coming up the stairs. Quickly, she ran towards the door. She had put the brooch into her pocket.

"Mummie, dear," she said, "can I come into Rexford with you?"

Her mother was quite willing that she should do so, for she knew that when the opportunity occurred Aggie dearly loved a spin through the country.

"Where are you going to first?" asked Aggie as they drove into Rexford.

"First of all, I'm going to Rogers'," said her mother, "to speak about a chair I want to have re-covered, and then I am going on to the dentist."

"Both equally dull!" Aggie grumbled. "While you're doing your business," she suggested, "couldn't I be dropped here?" "Here," was the High Street, down which they were passing. "I have some shopping that I want to do myself," announced Aggie, off-handedly.

"You can do just as you like, darling," Aggie's mother said. "I'm going home at half-past four. Suppose you meet me outside Stoneham's at that time?"

"Agreed!" said Aggie. And Pearson stopped

the car in the High Street that Aggie might get down.

Cook the dentist lived on the further side of Rexford. Aggie watched the car sailing down the High Street, watched it until it had disappeared round the corner. Then she turned and hurried to leave the High Street. She hurried, because she had caught sight of a familiar figure, and she did not wish to be delayed until her important mission had been executed. The familiar figure she had espied was that of the Colonel, who, like herself, had come into Rexford to do a little shopping.

From the High Street she went into the street running parallel—Raymond Street, where Green the jeweller lived. To reach the jeweller's shop, she had to pass by the *Bon Marché*, the one draper's establishment the town possessed. In the window Aggie saw displayed a red silk sash, the very colour of the sash she had lost, which was marked in clear figures, two shillings and sixpence.

Aggie went boldly into Green's. All the families round Rexford dealt with Green. He provided all the wedding presents of the district, and minded, as he said, the clocks of all the gentry.

A young assistant of anæmic countenance was in attendance.

"I want to see Mr. Green," said Aggie importantly.

The assistant looked Aggie up and down. "It's Miss Phillips, isn't it?" he said.

Aggie hesitated for a moment. It sounded so funny to be addressed as Miss Phillips. She was always known as Miss Aggie to the tradesfolk.

"Yes, I suppose I am Miss Phillips," she replied. "And I want to see Mr. Green—Mr. Green

himself," she persisted, "upon most important business."

At this moment Mr. Green came out of the back room.

"Oh, Mr. Green!" she exclaimed as soon as he appeared. "I've come to see you about something most fearfully particular."

"Well, what is it, Miss Aggie?" Mr. Green had taken Aggie's hand in his and was patting it in a confidential manner, for he had known Aggie all her life, and he had worked for her family before she had been born.

He was standing behind the counter. Aggie was standing on its other side.

"I wish to speak to you in private, undisturbed," she said.

"But that sounds very serious!" Mr. Green exclaimed. "Well, come along then into my room behind the shop and tell me all about it." He spoke in a paternal manner—in such a manner as a father might have spoken to a little child.

Aggie followed him into the room. It was a dull, gloomy room. But Aggie was far too excited, too full of the object of her visit, to pay any attention to the room or its contents.

"I want to sell you a brooch for two shillings and sixpence," she began. "It's a gold brooch, and it's rather nice. I bought it for myself, but I'm tired of jewellery now. I call jewellery 'fudge,' don't you?"

"Come, come, Miss Aggie," Mr. Green replied, "and me in the jewellery business, too!"

"I want to know," Aggie meant to come to the point as quickly as possible, "whether you'll give me two shillings and sixpence for this?" She pulled

out from her pocket the pretty little gold-and-pearl brooch which she had taken from her jewel-case. She waited anxiously while Mr. Green put on his glasses to examine it.

"Well!" said Aggie as she balanced herself, as was her wont in moments of intense excitement, first on one foot, then on the other.

Mr. Green shook his head over the brooch.

"I couldn't give you two-and-sixpence for that!" he said.

"You couldn't?" said Aggie. Her face fell and her mouth drooped. The sash that she wanted cost two-and-sixpence. What should she do if he wouldn't give her so much for the brooch?

"Isn't it worth it?" she said a little sadly. "It truly is real gold and pearls."

"I couldn't give you two-and-sixpence for that!" Mr. Green repeated. "My conscience wouldn't let me. Look here, Miss Aggie. Your brooch is worth a lot more than two-and-sixpence. I know what it is to be hard up. I've often been hard up myself. Suppose I lend you the two-and-sixpence, and keep this brooch for security? How would that suit, young lady? There's a birthday, or there's Christmas always coming round, and I daresay some kind uncle or aunt will be making you a money present. So I'll keep this brooch till then. You shall have the two-and-sixpence; and when you want to buy it back again, you'll find it waiting for you here.

And Mr. Green put the brooch into a drawer, which he locked up carefully. Then he drew a half-crown from his pocket and handed it to the delighted Aggie. Aggie could scarcely speak because she felt so thankful, so happy, so relieved.

Mr. Green opened the door preparatory to showing Aggie out. As he did so, a flood of light came pouring into the room.

Aggie, glancing round now for the first time during the interview, suddenly found her attention arrested by a square, brass-faced clock which stood upon the shelf. She had recognized the clock. It was none other than the Colonel's clock, the clock which had been stolen from Woodbourne! She grasped Mr. Green by the arm.

"Where—where——" she began. "How—how could you have come by that clock there—on the shelf?"

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### READJUSTMENT

HALF AN HOUR later, Aggie left the jewellery shop.

Poor Mr. Green felt, as with relief he watched her pass into the street, that he had never been so thoroughly and effectively catechized about anything as he had been catechized by Miss Aggie Phillips about that clock.

She must know everything. How it had come into his possession, and when it had been brought. She must have a minute and exact description of the person who had brought it. What was more, she must extract the promise from him to send the clock back to Woodbourne not later than five o'clock on Monday

afternoon, and to send it addressed to herself, and not to the Colonel.

And then, for some utterly unknown reason, she had smiled and looked very pleased indeed.

She had been still smiling when she left the shop. Her eyes were dancing with excitement. The "Spouts" would be triumphant after all! By chance, she had discovered the identity of the burglar who had taken the Woodbourne property. The burglar was neither Herr-Monsieur, Don Qui, nor yet, what was more surprising still, the tattered vagrant. All she had now to do was to find the whereabouts of the silver cups, and to prevent the boys from stumbling, as she had stumbled, on the truth. The man who had committed the burglary must be present at the meeting on Monday afternoon. She herself would point to the villain, and say: "There stands the man who is responsible for the absence of the cups from the drawing-room, and the clock from the library!" For her, that moment would be a moment of triumph. What was even better was that Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui would be exonerated from any blame in the matter of the burglary.

How she longed for Monday!

But the vagrants? The vagrant and his wife—the wife who carried the mock baby? The vagrant who haunted Woodbourne, sometimes as a beggar, sometimes as a red-haired gardener—what of him? Beyond a doubt she had proved that he had not taken the clock. There must have been some reason for the presence of these people in the woods.

Since the destruction of the hut they had disappeared, so she need concern herself with them no longer. She must reserve all her energies for finding

the cups and the salver, and by some strategy of her own she must endeavour to put the boys completely off the scent.

Before Aggie had time to think of what nature this strategy would take, the familiar figure which she had noticed in the High Street that afternoon actually knocked right up against her before either of them had realized the presence of the other.

The Colonel seemed quite surprised when he saw Aggie issuing out of Green's shop.

"Been spending all your money, young lady, been spending all your money?" he stammered, as Aggie tucked her arm through his and marched him down the street.

"No, I haven't been spending my money," she chuckled, and she clutched the half-crown, which Mr. Green had given her, tightly in her hand.

She went with the Colonel as far as the corner of the road. Then she removed her hand from his arm.

"I must leave you now," she said, "because I have to go to the *Bon Marché* before I meet mother at Stoneham's, where she'll be waiting for me in the car. I have to buy something," she said importantly, "for to-night's theatricals. You are coming, aren't you?" she persisted. "You're coming to see our play to-night?"

The Colonel shook his head.

"Dreadfully sorry, young lady," he apologized, "dreadfully sorry! I've been looking forward to the entertainment for weeks, but business, important business, will keep me at home to-night."

As he spoke, the Colonel smiled consciously. It was indeed important business that would keep him at home that night. For that morning he had received

a communication from those "High in Authority," asking that the plans of the Aero-Destroyer might reach them not later than the following Tuesday afternoon.

He meant to take those plans to London himself by the 9.15 train. He had come in that afternoon to ask Mr. Nephens to accompany him on the journey. But Mr. Nephens had been out, so he had made an appointment for the following Monday at two o'clock.

Though practically complete, there were yet many finishing touches to be added to the sketches for which he would need all the available time at his disposal.

Aggie chattered on, but he scarcely heard what she was saying. With that Aero-Destroyer, he was up among the clouds.

"I call it too bad of you!" Aggie was fretting. "What's the good of the play being underneath your immediate patronage if you're not coming to it?"

"Under—under," said the Colonel reprovingly.

Aggie tossed her head.

"That doesn't matter, anyhow!" she said. "What does matter is that I'm most horribly disappointed, and so shall we all be, that you can't come to-night."

She walked away, but before the Colonel had realized she had done so, back again she came rushing.

"Are you going home by train?" she asked.

"Yes, by the half-past five," he answered. "Williams is meeting me with the dog-cart. This time I took the precaution of ordering him myself," he muttered.

"Oh, well!" cried Aggie, "you'll be home before he's started, long before, because it's only a twenty minutes' run from here to Ashleigh, and as we're leaving

Stoneham's at half-past four we should reach Woodbourne by ten minutes to five. I'll only forgive you for not coming to the show to-night if you'll promise to motor back to Ashleigh in our car. You are not to say 'No,'" she said as the Colonel was about to protest, "because I've a great many things about which I want to talk to you. I want you to tell me all over again about the burglaries!"

## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE BLACK VAN

Whilst Aggie had been deeply engrossed in conversation with Mr. Green a plain black-covered van had passed along Raymond Street. Had Aggie been walking down the road it is quite probable that she might never have noticed this unremarkable-looking cart, for it was much as other carts, save that it had no name painted on its canvas covering. The man who drove it was much as other men of his class, so was the man who sat beside him. They both had beards and shaggy eyebrows.

Upon leaving Rexford, this cart had passed an elderly man with white hair and moustache who had been walking towards Raymond Street. Having passed him, the driver whipped up his horse. Along the road which led from Rexford to Ashleigh the van rattled at a good pace. When the village of Ashleigh came within sight, the driver swerved off the main road and took the lane which led to Woodbourne.

The gates of Woodbourne stood wide open, for the Colonel had driven through them earlier in the afternoon.

The carman pulled out his watch. It was a remarkably handsome watch for such a man to be wearing. It was a quarter to five, and the next train was not due at Ashleigh until six o'clock.

With a slash of his whip he turned the van in through the gates. It rumbled up the drive and came to a standstill before the hall door.

The man who rode beside the driver got down from his seat. He went up the steps and pulled the bell, and McAron answered the summons. The man had drawn out an official-looking notebook from his pocket, and as the door was opened he was absorbed in its contents.

"What do you want?" McAron inquired sharply, as he looked from the man to the van which had driven up so ostentatiously.

"I've called to take away the ottoman what wants repairing," said the man.

"The ottoman—the ottoman?" he repeated.

McAron had received no orders to send away the ottoman. Again the man consulted the book which he was holding in his hand.

"I've been instructed to call for the ottoman, most particularly," he insisted. "The ottoman in the library," he read out, "upholstered in a rose chintz."

"Well, certainly," said McAron, "there is an ottoman in the library upholstered in a rose chintz. The Colonel usually tells me when a thing's to be fetched away," McAron still demurred.

"Well, them's my orders," the carman persisted,

and he tapped the open book with a pencil he had taken from his pocket.

"Oh! well, if you've been ordered to take it away I suppose you'd better," McAron gave in at length.

The carman turned and beckoned to the driver; it would need two to carry out that ottoman. The driver was about to get down from his seat when there came the sound of a motor turning in through the gates. It came up the drive. On the front seat sat a girl with flying hair, and in the tonneau, beside a lady wearing a hat swathed with a veil, was an elderly man with white hair and a white moustache.

"Hold on!" McAron was barring the carman's entrance. "Here's the Colonel coming back himself. He's been motored home from Rexford. I'll just find out if it's all right about the ottoman."

"The Colonel?" said the carman, and he spoke quite collectedly. "But surely this is Mr. Phillips' house?"

"Oh! no," said McAron. "This is Woodbourne, Colonel Norton's place. Mr. Phillips lives at the White House on top of the hill which you can see from where you're standing."

"Then I must have made a mistake," the carman answered. "Mr. Phillips' house is the one you say on top of the hill?"

The pip-pip of the motor had arrested the attention of the driver as he had been about to descend from his seat.

The carman scrambled back on to the van, and as the motor drew up before the house the cart rumbled away.

"What was that?" asked the Colonel as McAron came down to take the rug from Mrs. Phillips.

"Only some carriers from Rexford who mistook this for the White House," said McAron as, in addition to the rug, he gathered up his master's parcels. "They were after an ottoman to be repaired."

"An ottoman?" said Mrs. Phillips. "Why, it must have been Rogers calling for the chair I went in about this afternoon. He promised he would send at once; but how silly of the man to drive here, for after all, the only similarity between Woodbourne and the White House is in its initial letter."

Mrs. Phillips wanted to go straight back to her own home, but the Colonel insisted that she and Aggie must come in and have tea.

Of course, Aggie wanted to stay at Woodbourne, for other people's teas are so much nicer than one's own. So Mrs. Phillips was obliged to give way.

Aggie lingered for a little while in the garden. She never went indoors when it was possible for her to stay out. She was examining the library and drawing-room windows critically, both of them so momentously connected with the recent burglaries.

"Tea is ready, Miss," said McAron, appearing from the house.

Aggie was about to go indoors when McAron's voice detained her.

"Miss Aggie."

"Yes."

"Is the chair that has to be re-covered at your house upholstered in rose chintz?"

"Oh! yes," said Aggie, "it's covered with a lovely chintz which is all little pink roses, white daisies and blue ribbons."

"Well, I suppose it must be all right," McAron answered as he went indoors, "but certainly they seemed a very rum pair."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### SILVER FOR COPPER

PETER and Danger had spent the morning trying to collect enough money from the Patrol to loan the bloodhound.

They had been successful beyond their wildest expectations, for the "Panthers" had subscribed the magnificent sum of two shillings and three-halfpence. This sum constituted the entire wealth of the Patrol.

At an impromptu meeting held directly after luncheon it had been decided that Peter as Leader of the Patrol, and Lambert as its Corporal, should be the two to go in search of the bloodhound. It was arranged that they should reach the Lonely Farm by half-past three, and that by four o'clock the others should assemble at the entrance of the woods to await their return. Peter was to stipulate that they should keep the creature overnight, and return him on the following afternoon to save a second journey to the Lonely Farm that day.

Shortly after three o'clock Peter and Lambert set forth on their exciting expedition.

"I hope he won't be cantankerous," Peter said. "Suppose he won't lend the hound?"

"Oh! he'll lend it right enough if he's paid to do so," Lambert said.

It was after half-past three when they reached the Lonely Farm.

The house was surrounded by a desolate and ill-kept garden. Flowers and weeds grew apace in the same bed. The grass looked as though it had been uncut for many a long day. The whole place had an air of desolation about it, and it was all miserably depressing.

"It gives one the hump to look at it, doesn't it?" said Lambert.

"'Umps," Peter answered.

They had no need to ring the bell or to knock upon the door, for no sooner had they passed in through the broken-down gateway than the door was flung wide open, and out from the house hurried an irascible old man. He was wearing tattered clothing, his face was yellow and sunken, his beard was long and unkempt. His hair was long and unkempt too.

"Who's walking on my property?" he growled.

"We are," said Peter stoutly.

"And what right have you to walk upon my property?"

"We've come to fetch your hound," Lambert interposed.

There had slunk out from a kennel in the backyard a great bloodhound, who looked upon the boys with crimson eyes.

"We want the loan of him," Peter began to explain.

"And why should I loan my dog to you?" the old man asked sarcastically.

"We mean to pay money for him," Lambert cried

out quickly, and he rattled the coins which he was carrying in his pocket.

As the old man listened to the clinking of coins his beady eyes lit up.

"Money—money," he said, and he rubbed his dry hands together. "I shall want much silver, more silver than you will want to pay me."

Nevertheless, he beckoned to the boys to follow him into the house. He took them into a front room. The same room which he had been prevailed upon, money having again been used as an inducement, to let to some strangers who had come in search of lodgings on the previous day.

"I've lodgers here," he said, "but they'll not be in till this evening. 'Tis good they said they'd not be in till the evening, for I am too poor," he whined, "to give them aught but supper."

"For the loan of the hound," said Peter—he and Lambert were standing on one side of the hearth, the miser was standing on the other—"we will give you one-and-sixpence." Peter was trying it on. The old man shook his head.

"Not for one-and-sixpence, not for one shilling and sixpence, could I let my beauty go. You shall not have him for one-and-sixpence," and he leered at them out of the corners of his eyes.

"Well, for two shillings, then," Peter urged.

But the old man shook his head.

"For two shillings and sixpence, for two shillings and sixpence," he kept repeating, "I might loan you the hound—yes, I might loan him for two shillings and sixpence; for two shillings, no; for two shillings, no."

Peter's face fell. Would the old man, he wondered,

really not let him have the dog for less than two shillings and sixpence? If such were indeed the case their beautiful scheme must come to naught, for he had not sufficient money with him, and he had collected all that he could collect.

"We can't pay you two-and-sixpence," Peter said, "because we haven't two shillings and sixpence in our pockets. Come on, Henry," he added, and turned as if to go. Perhaps if the old man really saw they were going away he might come to terms. Peter had surmised correctly, for as they were about to leave the room he ran after them.

"You will pay me how much?" he inquired cunningly. "You have how much in your pockets?"

"Two shillings, a penny and a halfpenny," Lambert replied, and he drew the coins from his pocket as he spoke. "It's all we have in the world."

The old man feasted his eyes on the glittering money Lambert held out on the palm of his hand. Once he made a movement forward as if to grasp it with his long, bony fingers.

"It is very little, very little," he complained.

"Well, it's all you'll get, for it's all we have," said Peter rather crossly. "You know you're dying to have it; you'd hate to see us take it away again."

The old man started at the words.

Let them take away all that lovely, beautiful money? And he sidled up to Lambert. He caught hold of him by the coat, as though he were afraid he might really leave the house. "It's little enough, little enough," he whispered, "but I'm poor, very poor."

"We will return the hound to-morrow afternoon," said Peter firmly.

"How do I know that you will return the hound?" the old man muttered knowingly.

"Because I tell you so," said Peter. "My father lives at the White House in Ashleigh."

"You must write that down," the old man insisted. "You must write down your father's name, and the name of your father's house; and you must pay me the two shillings, the penny and the halfpenny before I let my beauty go."

"If you'll give me a piece of paper——" Peter began.

"I have no paper," said the miser. "I have no paper." Even paper was priceless to the niggard.

Peter fumbled in his pockets. He pulled out a crumpled circular. It was a handbill relating to the girls' theatricals which were to take place that evening. At the end of the circular, Colonel Norton's name appeared as President of the evening's entertainment. At the foot it was stated that tickets could be obtained from Mrs. Phillips, at the White House, or could be bought on the evening of the performance at the school doors.

"Hullo! I needn't write it after all," said Peter as he smoothed out the crumpled circular and laid it on the table. "That's my father's name," he said—"Phillips, as I told you once before; and that is my address."

The old man nodded. He had been aware all the time of Peter's identity.

"The money now," he said, "the money." And he held out his thin bony hand to Lambert.

"Where is the hound?" said Peter, for the hound had not followed his master into the room.

The miser opened the door.

"Copper!" he called, "Copper!" for even in the choice of his dog's name the love of money had pursued him.

Copper came out from his kennel in answer to his master's summons.

"We must have him on a chain," said Peter.

"A chain?" the old man cackled drily. "A chain? How should I have the money to buy a chain?"

It was obvious that he would give them no chain. But Lambert, who always thought ahead, had come provided. Out of his pocket he pulled a piece of knotted string. This he fastened round the hound's neck, for the creature had come sidling up to Lambert, and had rubbed its head against his knees.

"The money!" screamed the old man, "the money!"

"There's your money," said Lambert. He flung it down on to the table.

The old man clawed it up. He counted it over; he bit the silver pieces.

"We will bring Copper back to-morrow," Peter reassured him as he marched off with Lambert and the hound.

The old man never said one word although he had followed them to the door. He stood there, shading his eyes with his hand; and he watched them until they had disappeared from sight.

Then he went into his sanctum—the room into which no one was ever permitted to penetrate. From the lining of his coat he took the key of a cupboard which stood against the wall. Out of this cupboard he took an ancient cocoa tin, and, having taken off the lid, he dropped into it his newly-acquired wealth,

coin by coin. He put the lid on again and shook the tin. His eyes gleamed. He sat there, listening to the sound of the coins as they rattled against the metal sides. The sound was as music in his ears. Once again he took the money out; he jingled it between the palms of his hands, then put it back into the tin. Again he shook the tin to and fro. He sat there playing with the money, happy and contented as a child.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### FOUND AT LAST

Long before Peter and Lambert appeared with the hound the remainder of the Scouts assembled at the entrance to the woods, for the return journey had been fraught with much difficulty, since Copper had shown a tremendous inclination to explore right and left, to wander everywhere, in fact, except down the main track along which Lambert was trying to induce him to walk quietly.

It was O'Neill who first sighted the trio.

"They've got him!" he exclaimed.

"Good!" cried Danger, and he leant forward to see what could be seen.

"He does look a ferocious animal!" said Stewart.

"Oh, I expect he's tame enough till he's roused," Fraser interposed.

"We got him all right!" Peter cried as soon as he was within speaking distance of the Scouts. "We

shouldn't have got him, though, if it hadn't been for the money. The old skinflint fairly grabbed the coins —halfpennies, pennies, threepennies, the whole bang lot."

The creature was leaping up at Danger, trying to lick his hands and face. He seemed to know instinctively that he was among friends.

"I've got it in my pocket," Peter said, and he patted the pocket of his waistcoat affectionately. *It* was the little bit of brown stuff he had taken from the spike. "He shan't have it, though, until we start him fair and square from Number 8's house."

Straight towards Combe Lodge the Patrol marched, two and two, Lambert and Peter, as usual, marching ahead. Between them, the great Copper ambled peaceably.

They halted before the steps of Danger's house. Copper sat down on the pathway and beat upon the stones with his thick, rope-like tail.

"Here, old boy," said Peter as he pulled the bit of browny stuff from his pocket, "go seek."

Lambert was still holding Copper by the lead.

The hound smelt the scrap of material which Peter was holding out towards him. He quested about with his nose to the ground. He went from the steps to Danger's window, and from the window to the steps, then back from the steps to the window once more.

"Look! Look!" cried Danger excitedly, "he knows they were round my window. Oh! he is a clever creature!"

Still the hound cast round. Then, all at once, he hit the trail. He raised his beautiful red wrinkled head, and gave tongue in a deep bay. He tugged at his lead. He made off at a rapid pace, tearing down

the road along which Pearson had conducted Aggie upon the previous evening. When he came to the spot where the motor, owing to temporary disablement, had broken down, he received a check. He no longer raced as he had been doing. The scent had been foiled, so he hunted carefully until he had verified the original trail.

The boys watched him while he quested about, full of interest. Lambert felt relieved that he had slowed up, for the hound had nearly run him off his legs.

"We'll find them, we'll find them!" Peter cried excitedly. "Good old Copper will at all events track down the owner of that bit of brown stuff."

The hound had struck the line again. He was off now, travelling even at a greater pace than he had done previously.

The day was favourable, for the wind was soft and the ground was moist. Sometimes he raced with his head up, showing that the scent was breast high.

And then a dreadful thing happened! The creature had weakened the cord at which he had been straining all the while. The cord snapped! The hound, freed, rushed like a whirlwind down the road.

The boys tore after him; but run as they would they could in no way keep pace with him. By the time they had reached the lane which led down from the Rexford road to Woodbourne, the hound was completely out of sight.

Whether he had turned down that lane, whether he had made straight for the woods, or whether he had continued along the main road, past the White House, they knew not.

Lambert was eager to take the blame of Copper's flight upon himself. It was he who had provided the

insufficiently strong cord. But Peter would not have it. No one was to blame. "Every one," he said, "must do his best, however, to try and recapture the lost animal."

Some went this way, some went that; far and near they hunted. But when in an hour's time, as it had been arranged, they met once again at the spot where Copper had secured his liberty, not one of them had caught so much as a glimpse of the missing hound.

Peter had been as far as the Lonely Farm. But he had found the kennel in which Copper slept deserted. There was no sign of the hound about the place. Peter had even dared to ring the front-door bell, but though he had rung it many times no one had come in answer to his summons.

So the Patrol, once again disheartened, separated, each Scout departing to his home.

Peter, feeling very bad over things, and very disappointed at the result of the afternoon's adventure, walked moodily up the hill leading to his home. The gates were open. There were signs that a car had recently passed through them; his mother had evidently returned from Rexford.

He sauntered up the drive. And then a sight met his gaze which left him feeling no longer moody and inert, for there, sitting on the grass in front of the house, was his sister Aggie, and her arms were wound round the neck of the very dog for whom he had been searching!

The moment that Aggie caught sight of Peter she waved to him eagerly.

"Oh!" she cried. "Where did he come from, this perfect pet? He was sitting on the doorstep when we drove up. I'd been into Rexford with mummie,

and no sooner did I get down from the car than he came bounding up to me. And he stood up on his hind legs and put his dear paws on my shoulder. It was ages before I could persuade him to be quiet."

"He's a silly fool!" said Peter, "that's what he is. We borrowed him from the Lonely Farm to follow up a trail."

"What trail?" said Aggie anxiously. Why was Peter following up a trail when she knew that he had renounced all hope of finding the burglars?

"Oh, nothing!" Peter answered. "If he'd made for Woodbourne, now, there might have been some sense in it."

"Made for Woodbourne?" said Aggie desperately.

But Peter had gone off whistling to the stables. He whistled even though he was sad at heart. A Scout must whistle in the black hours. He meant to lock up the "silly fool," as he would persist in calling the really sagacious Copper, in the empty loose-box for the night.

Aggie, having watched Peter until he was out of sight, scrambled on to her feet and went indoors. Peter, too, had discovered some new clue. Suppose the clue which he had discovered should lead to the person whose identity she had discovered that afternoon at Rexford! More than ever, Aggie now determined by some means or other to put the Scouts off the scent.

On the hall table, to her surprise, she found a letter for her marked "urgent." She tore it open and glanced quickly at its contents.

"Mummie, Mummie!" she cried, bounding up the stairs, "isn't it simply lovely—no, I mean, isn't it fearfully sad—at least, it's lovely for me, but fear-

fully sad for Sylvia! She's got measles and can't take the part of the Boy Babe to-night, and so Miss Morecambe has written to ask me to take it."

Her mother was talking to Nannie, who was helping her to dress.

"It's a very funny thing," she said, "that Rogers didn't call for that chair after all. His men went to Woodbourne by mistake, and McAron sent them on here."

"Oh, Mummie, Mummie!" Aggie was in her mother's room now. "Do listen to what Miss Morecambe has written."

She had perched herself upon the rail of her mother's bed, and began to read the "urgent" letter she had at that moment received.

"DEAR AGGIE," so Miss Morecambe had begun—

"You will be very sorry to hear that your schoolfellow, Sylvia Brunt, has measles. She will not be able to play her part to-night, so I am writing to ask you to take her place. Sylvia was to have worn her drill tunic, covered with an overall. You can wear your drill tunic, can you not? Perhaps you will be able to borrow an overall, as it would not do to wear Sylvia's, lest it should carry infection. Sylvia was providing the doll used in the nursery scene. I daresay you will have a doll which you can bring.

"Your affectionate teacher,
"ALICE MORECAMBE."

"Oh, Mummie! of course, I'm very sorry for Sylvia," Aggie chattered on, "but how I shall love to play the part!"

"How I shall love to see my little daughter play it!" said her mother. "It was a fortunate thing your theatricals did not fall on Monday night, for your father and I are going to motor down to-morrow to stay with your Aunt Beatrice at Felixstowe. We shall be away till Tuesday."

"You'll be away to-morrow night?" said Aggie reflectively. Then she became engrossed in the theatricals once more.

"There's that old overall of Peter's which he uses when he cleans his bicycle," she said. "Perhaps I might borrow that?"

"Peter! Peter!" She ran towards the window, but she could not see Peter anywhere.

She ran out of her mother's room, down the stairs, out into the garden, round towards the stables. In the empty loose-box, into which Peter had put Copper, the hound sat howling sadly. Still she could not find Peter.

"Seen Peter?" Aggie asked as she caught sight of Pearson. He was looking to the car which was to take her to the Willows. He meant to have no break-down this time. It had taken him till nearly midnight to repair the damage of the previous evening.

"He's gone out again," said Pearson.

"Bother!" Aggie answered. "I expect, though," she murmured to herself as she ran back to the house, "that I shall find that overall in his rubbish drawer."

Both Peter and Aggie were allowed to keep the bottom drawer in their wardrobes for rubbish drawers. Here they might stow away any treasures that they liked.

Once she had regained the house she went straight

up to Peter's room, and tried to open the rubbish drawer.

It was so full of treasures that she had trouble in doing so, since a piece of something had become wedged in the lock. She pulled and pulled. Eventually she succeeded. The something which had become lodged in the hasp was the overall for which she was searching. Triumphantly she dragged it out. Then she started, for underneath the overall was a crumpled red silk sash—the very sash which she had been trying to recover for the past two days! So Peter must have been aware of Danger's plight. She wondered if the boys had any inkling as to who it was who had made the victim prisoner.

She replaced the sash in the drawer; she had found it too late to be of any use to her. With the overall tucked beneath her arm she hurried to her own room.

Nannie came herself to attend to Aggie's curls. With the tongs she made the loveliest curls of Aggie's stringy wisps.

"I've got to take a doll, Nannie," she began. "I don't know what to do for a doll because I threw all mine away when I was twelve. Oh! I know, I know!" she said, before Nannie had time to offer any suggestion. "It's all right, don't you worry." And when Nannie had left the room to fetch Aggie's shoes and coat, Aggie pulled out from her rubbish drawer—Babette.

"You shall take part in the theatricals to-night," she announced. And she stood there, swinging the doll to and fro, a really quaint little figure in a blue-striped overall, with curls bobbing round her face.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### AN INTERESTING HANDBILL

The miser continued to play with his money until nearly seven o'clock. He might have played yet longer, had he not been at that moment disturbed by the sound of footsteps on the gravel. He peered out through the window. The footsteps were those of his lodgers returning. A little earlier in the afternoon he had seen, from his peep-hole behind the curtains, the boy Peter Phillips return. He had heard him come up to the door and ring the bell. He had heard him ring the bell more than once, but the miser had not desired further parley with the unwelcome visitor. To his relief he had seen Peter turn away a little later.

Back into the cupboard, out of which he had taken it, he placed the tin; then he closed and locked the door and slipped the key once again into the lining of his coat. Then he went towards the window and pulled down the blind. Even as he had locked the cupboard so he now locked the door which led into the passage, for it was his custom to bolt and bar himself into his room for the evening.

This custom had come to the knowledge of his lodgers and it well suited their scheme, their divers schemes rather, for now they were one person, now another. That very day had seen them to be both carpenters and carriers.

They had not driven from Woodbourne to the White House as McAron had directed. They had

gone straight back to Rexford, where they had dismounted from the covered cart. From Rexford they had walked to the Lonely Farm. They were working men once more, engaged in the carpentering trade. On reaching the Lonely Farm, they had gone straight into their sitting-room.

The handbill which Peter had given the miser still lay on the table.

But Herr-Monsieur was too absorbed in a letter which he had taken from his pocket to notice the piece of printed paper for the moment. This letter had been waiting for him at the Rexford Post Office. It bore a foreign post-mark and a foreign stamp. Already Herr-Monsieur had read the letter through innumerable times. At headquarters things were coming to a crux. With or without those plans, the Master Spy commanded that his servants should leave England on the following Tuesday at the latest.

To return without those plans, to return without Babette and the sketches he had made and stored within her breast, would spell ruin to his future career. Saturday evening, Sunday, Monday—he had only two days and a half in which to secure the plans. He must obtain possession of them cost him what it might!

He had been standing by the window. Don Qui had settled himself in the one arm-chair the room possessed. Herr-Monsieur went towards the table. His brows were contracted. When and how should they make the next attempt? If he could only know for certain when the Colonel would be out!

"What is this?" he said. "How came it here?"

He had picked up the handbill which Peter had taken from his pocket—

"TO-NIGHT
at 8.15

A PLAY

entitled

THE BABES IN THE WOOD

will be given at the Willows
in aid of local charities.

PRESIDENT: COLONEL NORTON, D.S.O.

Tickets can be obtained from: The Willows; Mrs. Phillips, The White House; or may be purchased at the door."

"Tickets may be purchased at the door," Herr-Monsieur mused. "See here," he said sharply, and he tapped on the table with his fingers.

Don Qui rose from the arm-chair and joined Herr-Monsieur. Without a word of comment Herr-Monsieur handed him the circular.

"We might," said Don Qui slowly, as he read the bill through very carefully, "we might make an attempt to-night. It was that you had in your mind, was it not? The Colonel, as President, will surely attend the performance."

"Before I make the attempt," Herr-Monsieur said, "I mean to be quite certain that the Colonel

is present at the entertainment. We can afford to run no risks now."

"But how will you know whether he is present?" inquired Don Qui.

Herr-Monsieur laughed.

"Tickets may be procured at the door," he said. "You and I will procure tickets, which will enable us to inspect the audience assembled. If the Colonel be present——"

"We shall not see the finale of that play," interrupted Don Qui.

"You have spoken truly," answered Herr-Monsieur. "If he be absent," Herr-Monsieur shrugged his shoulders, "it will mean, more than probably, that he is at home; so, for this evening Woodbourne will be taboo, and we shall return quietly to our beds. In those beds we shall not sleep, however. We will lie awake until we have devised some means by which we may gain possession of those plans before Tuesday next."

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE LOST BABETTE

Thomas Galæ had been brought to the performance. So had Alfred, sister Annie's son, who had come all the way from Rexford and was returning to Rexford that same evening.

Mrs. Gale had ushered her nephews into the hall with much unction. Nephew Thomas, who was

Alfred's senior by many years, clapped in all the wrong places, and slumbered peacefully through all those parts of the play in which Aggie did not appear. When Aggie was on the stage, Mrs. Gale took good care that her nephew should remain awake.

Beside Mrs. Gale, until the curtain had risen, there had been two empty places. At the beginning of the first act, however, a man and a woman had come into the hall and had taken the vacant seats at her side. These had been the only empty places in the hall, save the imposing arm-chair in the centre of the front row, which had been reserved for the President, who was conspicuous by his absence.

Mrs. Gale's neighbours were evidently not from the village, since she did not know them by sight; but there were many people she did not know by sight that evening, for the theatricals had attracted people from all parts.

The man, so Mrs. Gale observed, was dressed in ordinary working clothes. The woman, whose seat was next to Mrs. Gale, was wrapped in a shepherd's-plaid shawl that seemed a little out of keeping with the rather gay bonnet she was wearing, in which lilies-of-the-valley nodded frivolously whenever the good lady shook her head. She wore a thick spotted veil, which she did not, rather to Mrs. Gale's surprise, raise during the performance, though it must have prevented her from seeing a great deal that Miss Aggie did.

It was not until the middle of the first act that Mrs. Gale addressed her neighbours. F.F. had just distinguished herself by falling through a barrel, which catastrophe had brought down the house.

"You haven't got a programme?" she whispered

as the uproarious mirth abated. "That was Miss Phyllis who did that. But there! perhaps you'd like to have a look at mine?" she added.

"Thanks," whispered her neighbour very softly, so softly that Mrs. Gale was not quite sure whether she had spoken at all. However, she handed her the programme and pointed to Aggie's name, for an inset had been slipped into the programme stating that owing to the illness of Miss Sylvia Brunt, the part of the Boy Babe would be played by Miss Agnes Phillips.

"She doesn't come on till the next scene," Mrs. Gale explained. "She's worth the lot of them is Miss Aggie;" and then some one commenced to sing and Mrs. Gale relapsed into silence, which silence she maintained until the curtain dropped at the conclusion of the scene. When the curtain fell the "house-lights" were again raised.

Mrs. Gale's neighbours craned their necks to look towards the chair which should have been occupied by the President of the evening. That chair was still vacant. He might have been detained, of course, and he might be coming yet. The couple settled down to await the second act, but Mrs. Gale had no intention of allowing them to sit in silence.

"You're strangers to this part?" she said. "There're a good many strangers here to-night. Maybe you come from Rexford?"

"From the other side of Rexford," said her next-door neighbour—the Lady of the Lilies. She spoke in a queer, hoarse voice. Mrs. Gale's sympathies were at once aroused. The poor soul must have a very bad cold.

"Do you think it was wise of you to have ventured

out to-night with such a very bad cold ?" she said. "You have a cold, haven't you ?"

Her neighbour nodded her head until the lilies-of-the-valley in her bonnet rustled as they would have rustled in a breeze.

"I suppose you heard that Miss Aggie was acting ?" Mrs. Gale continued. Then, all in a breath, she went on without giving her neighbour time to reply.

"When you've got a cold the old remedies are the best, I always say. You put your feet into boiling water when you go home to-night, and have a hot lemon drink in bed. You might put a little rum into that lemon. That's what I do for Thomas when he has a cold, don't I, Thomas ?" She nudged her nephew with her arm. "I gave that Count I had staying with me a lemon drink one night, and he said he was a different person in the morning."

"So you've had a Count staying with you," the Lady of the Lilies murmured very much impressed.

"Yes," Mrs. Gale replied importantly. "Nicer gentlemen I never want to meet than the Count and his friend. There are some who seems to think it's suspicious-like, them going away as they did in such a hurry. But there, it was only a handful of boys who is after them who tried to make out they had gone and stolen something—the Scouts, as they call themselves, trying to make us believe they're that important. Why, me and my friend McAron was laughing over it only yesterday evening. McAron is the Colonel's confidential man. We often have a chat about old times. He comes down twice a week to fetch the Colonel's eggs. Mondays and Thursdays is his afternoons. By the way," said Widow Gale, trying to be pleasant, "let me introduce

you to my nephew Alfred, he's my sister Annie's son." Widow Gale leant across Thomas, who was again sound asleep, and tapped Alfred, a lanky, pale-faced boy, on the arm with her programme.

"Come, make yourself pleasant, lad," she said. "This lady has come all the way from Rexford to see Miss Aggie in her piece. She's got a mighty bad cold, too. I've been telling her to put her feet into boiling water when she gets back to-night, and to have a lemon piping hot before she goes to sleep."

The Lady of the Lilies began to wheeze asthmatically.

"Now, if I'd only brought some of those cinnamons," said Mrs. Gale regretfully. "Them cinnamon lozenges are a grand thing for the asthma."

"There's black-currant tea," said Alfred. "My mother always says there's nothing like black-currant tea for a cold."

"Indeed, I do wish I'd brought those lozenges," Mrs. Gale persisted.

"'Sh!" Suddenly she put her finger to her lips to command silence, though up to the present it was she who had been doing all the talking.

The bell which announced that the curtain was to rise upon the second act had just been rung, and this was the act in which Aggie was to make her first appearance—to wrangle with her fellow babe over the doll.

"I suppose," said the bearded workman (he had not spoken before, and he was speaking to his companion in an undertone), "that after this scene we ought to leave. It's no good to-night."

Though he had spoken *sotto voce* his last words

had reached Mrs. Gale's ears. Astounded, she leant across to address the offender.

"No good!" she cried indignantly. "I call it a splendid play. But there," she said as though she had spoken too harshly, "you haven't seen Miss Aggie yet. There, there she is," Mrs. Gale exclaimed, for at that moment the curtain had risen, and across the stage like a whirlwind, a girl, dressed as a boy, had rushed—a girl wearing a drill tunic covered with a blue-and-white-striped overall. She was swinging in her hand, with absolute nonchalance, a large and shabby doll. She threw it up into the air and caught it again; she tossed it into a corner, and there it lay until some one kicked it so viciously that its eyes were knocked in. It was the very doll, the priceless Babette, which Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui believed to be irrevocably buried under the ruins of the hut!

## CHAPTER XL

### MISPLACED KINDNESS

After all, Mrs. Gale's neighbours did not leave until the end of the play. Mrs. Gale was quite horrified when they suggested doing so. She knew the story of the *Babes in the Wood* by heart. They must surely want to see Miss Aggie taken into the forest and deceived by those wicked, wicked men. They must want to see her die and be covered with leaves by the robins. They couldn't possibly leave

before the Vicar's speech, for the Vicar always made a speech at the end of an entertainment. He would be telling them what had happened to the Colonel. Mrs. Gale was still a little distressed in her mind that the Colonel had not put in an appearance.

So they had stayed. They had heard the Vicar make his speech. They had heard him duly apologize for the absence of the Colonel. The Colonel had sent a message of regret. It was urgent business which, much against his inclination, had kept him at home that night.

Mrs. Gale's neighbours had trooped out with the rest of the audience from the hall. To look at them no one would have known that they had seen something that night which had disturbed them greatly; that the head under the nodding lilies was working out a plan how to regain possession of something which, to their surprise and consternation, they had seen that evening on the platform of the school hall

Once they had reached the door they slipped hastily away, for every moment they had expected Mrs. Gale to offer them the escort of her nephew Alfred.

So, after all, the true purpose of their stay in Ashleigh had not, as they had feared, been brought to light. They had merely fled from a handful of boys who, seeking for burglars, had believed them to have been the purloiners of some trumpery silver cups.

Babette—Babette ! How had Babette, who should have been crushed beneath the elm tree, come into the ferret's possession ? Here was yet another problem to be solved.

Mrs. Gale with her nephews had lingered a moment

on the roadway to have a word or two with some of her special friends.

"Wasn't Miss Aggie too beautiful," she said, "and didn't she say her part nicely? Ah, but there, she's——"

Thomas, who had a perennial cold, began to bark noisily. Mrs. Gale left her sentence unfinished and turned upon him rather irritably.

"I ought never to stir out of the house without them cinnamons," she said.

Thomas was fumbling in his pocket. He drew out a square box which he proceeded to open, and from which he took an oval-shaped pink tablet.

"You had them all the time," said Mrs. Gale reproachfully, "and there was that poor woman next to me a-wheezing and choking till my heart was aching for her. If you hadn't been so sleepy-headed you'd have heard me telling her about them. To think you had them in your pocket after all. Here, Alfred," she said, "they live Rexford way, and they can't have gone far. You just run after them as hard as you can, dear, and tell the poor thing with the cold to take two before she goes to bed to-night, and two after breakfast in the morning. It's on your way home, my lad, so if you run fast enough you're sure to overtake them."

Alfred, who was an obedient youth, darted off with the tablets in his hand to do his aunt's bidding.

It was not until he reached the woods that he caught sight of the couple he was endeavouring to overtake. Then, to his surprise, he observed that they did not take the rather longer but far safer road to Rexford which wound around the woods; instead, they plunged into their depths.

Alfred, now out of breath, paused for a moment.

"Fancy their going through the woods on a dark night like this!" he said. "They must be pretty strange to the place or they wouldn't do it."

Alfred even hesitated for a moment as to whether he would follow them or no. The woods were so eerie in the night-time! But he finally decided that he would do so.

While he had been pausing to gain breath the couple had made good headway, so that when he started to run again they were once more out of sight. In fact, he did not catch a second glimpse of them until he was within a few yards of the branch paths. But this couple were not going along the branch path which led to Rexford. They had taken the path to the left, the path which led to nowhere save the Lonely Farm.

Nothing would induce Alfred to go along that path alone. He had heard too many gruesome tales of the miser and his doings. Far rather would he walk out to Chimney House before church-time in the morning, return the lozenges, and tell his aunt how and why he had been forced to give up the pursuit.

## CHAPTER XLI

### NEWS OF THE VAGRANTS

Aggie wasn't one bit tired after the theatricals.

"Why, bless me, lovie, if it had been me that was acting, I'd have been in bed for a week," said Mrs.

Gale as she met Aggie coming out from church on the following morning.

Aggie lingered to talk to Mrs. Gale while her father and mother went round by the post office, for it was their custom to fetch the letters on Sunday after morning service.

Peter had not yet come out of the vestry, for Peter sang in the choir.

"You did like me," said Aggie, "didn't you?"

"Like you!" said Widow Gale, "why me and Thomas thought you was just wonderful, and so did me next-door neighbour, and she was a stranger, and hadn't known you since you was a little crawling baby like I'd done."

"Who was the neighbour?" Aggie asked, delighted with the praise she was receiving.

"She was a stranger to these parts," Mrs. Gale replied. "She'd come with her man to see the play. She told me she lived on the other side of Rexford, but my nephew Alfred came round to say this morning—because I'd sent him running after her with a box of 'cinns.'—that she didn't go to Rexford after all. She and her man went up the path which leads to the Lonely Farm. Alfred, who is a bit daft at times, was skeered to follow them."

"But they couldn't be living at the Lonely Farm," said Aggie. "That's the miser's house."

"If they was living out there," said Mrs. Gale, "why did they say they comed from the other side of Rexford?"

"Perhaps they were only going to call," suggested Aggie.

"Well, I never thought of that," said Mrs. Gale. "It was a bit late to pay a call, but there, funny

things do happen at the Lonely Farm, and perhaps poor Alfred wasn't so much to blame after all at being afeared to go there all alone."

"What were they like, this woman and her man?" persisted Aggie.

She was walking down the road tugging at the beads of Mrs. Gale's best Sunday mantle.

"I hadn't no truck with the man," Mrs. Gale replied. "Seemed a bit disagreeable-like. The woman, though, poor soul, had an awful cold, and was a-wheezing all the time. Sometimes I couldn't hear her properly when she spoke; she had such a very hoarse voice."

"Hoarse voice?" said Aggie sharply. "What was she wearing?"

She remembered having heard a few days before of some one else who had a hoarse voice.

"I couldn't see much of her besides her bonnet," Mrs. Gale made answer. "She was all wrapped up in a shawl. That was no doubt because of her bad cold. The shawl was of shepherd's plaid."

"Shepherd's plaid?" Aggie nearly screamed.

Then all at once she let go of the beads and, without even saying "good-bye," darted away like a hare, leaving Mrs. Gale wondering exceedingly what could possibly have happened.

The man and the woman who had haunted Woodbourne, for what reason Aggie knew not, since she had proved without a doubt that they had not committed the thefts, were now, she felt convinced, lodging, since their own shelter had been demolished, at the Lonely Farm.

Of these people Aggie was crazy to find out more. What must they have felt at seeing their mock baby

appearing in the second act? If only she could make some excuse to go to the Lonely Farm! She felt far too excited to want her luncheon. She arrived home, however, to find luncheon in full swing. Indeed, her father had already left the room to see about the car which was to take them to Felixstowe that afternoon.

Mrs. Phillips was opening the letters she had brought back from the post.

"That's a funny thing," she said.

"What's a funny thing?" asked Aggie as she slipped into her place.

"Why," said Mrs. Phillips, "I've had a letter from Rogers"—she had the curiosity to examine the postmark; the letter had been posted at 6.30—"to say that he will be unable to send for the chair I wish re-upholstered till Tuesday. Directly after I left, it appears"—Mrs. Phillips was telling Aggie the gist of the letter—"his man came in to say that a most unfortunate thing had happened to the van which had been sent out early in the afternoon to Appleton. On the return journey, somewhere about three o'clock, it met with a mishap. The van collided with a motor, the horse was thrown down, and the shafts of the wagon were broken into splinters. The driver, though, escaped by the skin of his teeth. Mr. Buckley very much regrets that, though he tried to do so, he was unable to get a cart to go to Ashleigh, as promised, that same evening, the only cart available having already been engaged for the afternoon. He hopes that I will excuse him from sending until Tuesday, by which time he says his own wagon will be repaired. It is really very funny," Mrs. Phillips said as she pushed back her chair, "because McAron distinctly

said that a van intended for here had called at Woodbourne by mistake.

"Well, Aggie, have you quite recovered from last night's festivities?" Mrs. Phillips paused to pat her on the shoulder as she passed her. "Every one was saying this morning how well you acted last night. I felt very proud of my little girl, and so did your father. He was more convinced than ever," Mrs. Phillips laughed, "that you should have been a boy."

"And that Peter should have been a girl," said Aggie promptly.

Peter made a mouth at Aggie.

"It's no good your doing that," said Aggie perversely, "you can never make it anything but a Cupid's bow."

Peter and Aggie were alone now in the room. Mrs. Phillips had gone to see to the packing of her trunk.

"Awful bore I've got to take that Copper back this afternoon!" Peter grumbled, "for I've had such a jolly invitation to spend the afternoon with Stewart. His 'sea' uncle, who tells ripping yarns, has come down for the week-end."

"The old man who lives at the Lonely Farm is a very cross old man, isn't he?" asked Aggie tentatively.

"I should think he is," said Peter.

"I believe I'd rather like to see him," she reflected.

"You wouldn't; you'd be afraid of him!" responded Peter scornfully.

"I shouldn't!"

"Bet you would!" Peter was in an aggravating mood. He was really disappointed about the afternoon, for he was a great admirer of Stewart's uncle.

"Look here," said Aggie promptly, "to show I am not afraid, I'll take Copper back for you myself."

Peter laughed.

"Oh!" he said, "I know what your taking back will be. You'll take him back in company with half a dozen girls, and you'll go in a lump up to the door, and then one of you will knock very bravely." Peter emphasized the words "very bravely" and stuck his hands in his pockets. He leant against the window-sill and kicked the paint with his feet. "And directly the door is opened, in you'll push Copper, and then you'll all take to your heels and tear back into the woods as fast as you can tear. Oh, I know what girls are like!"

"Look here," said Aggie. She was facing Peter squarely. Because she hadn't any pockets in which to put her hands she had thrust them through her belt—a favourite trick of hers. "You know that when I say that I'll do a thing, I'll do it, don't you?"

"Oh yes, you're obstinate enough," said Peter, "when you like!"

"Call it obstinacy if you want to," Aggie answered. "You'd call pink blue if it suited you to-day. You're so cross that I think you must have got out of bed the wrong side. I shall have to ask Nannie to put your bed against the wall to prevent your making such a mistake again!"

But Peter still looked glum. He wanted very badly to go to tea at Stewart's.

"I really will take Copper back," said Aggie, laying her hand upon his arm. She had reasons of her own, of which Peter was unaware, for wishing to visit the Lonely Farm that afternoon.

Peter was feeling better now. His ill-humours

only lasted for a very short time, and were never very serious.

"You really aren't half a bad monkey!" he allowed.

"Monkey!" said Aggie.

"Well, dad always calls you monkey, so why shouldn't I?"

"Oh! dad's different," Aggie said.

Aggie went out from the room. There was no Children's Service that afternoon, so she had nothing very particular to do with her time.

She closed the door behind her. Then she opened it again and poked her head round the corner. Peter was still standing with his hands in his pockets.

"I'm going to take Copper back," she announced. "I'm going to take him back all by myself, what's more! I'm not going to push him through the open door and run away. I'm going to meet the skinflint face to face. If I want to, I'm going to tell him just what I think of him, so there! Afraid!" said Aggie, as she slammed the door behind her. Would the Leader of the Girl Spouts be afraid of anything?

## CHAPTER XLII

### A FRUITLESS VISIT

No sooner had Aggie closed the door behind her than Peter rushed out after her. He had a feeling that perhaps he ought not to let her go to the Lonely Farm by herself.

But Aggie would have none of Peter's company. And Peter, having salved his conscience with the offer, which had been made with all good intentions, and which had been rejected so scornfully, went off whistling to call for Lambert.

When Peter had departed, Aggie lost no time in changing her Sunday frock for an everyday brown cashmere, and her Sunday "flop" for the round straw hat which she wore in preference to her scarlet tammy as a concession to the day. It was a rather cold afternoon, so she slipped on her brown raincoat over her brown dress.

She went down to the stables to fetch the waiting Copper.

No sooner had Aggie entered the loose-box in which Copper had been shut than the dog's paws were round her neck, and he was licking her hands and face. He drummed on the wooden floor with his tail in the exuberance of delight he felt at seeing Aggie.

"I wish I could keep you for always and always," she said as she curled her arms about his neck. "I wish I hadn't to restore you to that horrid, cross old miser. You don't like him, do you? It must be very dull for you, living all by yourselves, just you and he, at the Lonely Farm, only you're not quite by yourselves now, are you? Oh! I wonder—I wonder if those lodgers are the missing vagrants? Well, at all events, I'm going to find out for certain if the lodgers are a man and a woman, and if the woman wears a shawl of shepherd's plaid. Come along, now." And Aggie tied a piece of cord round Copper's neck—a stronger piece than that which had been used by Lambert on the previous day.

Her father and mother had already left on their

visit to her aunt, and there was no one to be particularly concerned about her movements, for, on Sunday afternoons, Nannie always had a long and undisturbed sleep.

Aggie, leading Copper, scampered down the drive. She cut into the woods, not by Woodbourne House this time but lower down, and made a track for herself among the bracken. She picked up the main track just beside the Oak Tree.

As she passed by the Oak Tree, she thought for a moment of the demolished hut.

They must have reasons, she mused, for still being about the neighbourhood. Reasons which seemed to be connected with Woodbourne. "I can't think what they want," she fretted. "I can't think why they should have been at our theatricals last night. It must have been the same woman that Pearson saw, because there wouldn't be two women here within the week with gruff voices and wearing shawls of shepherd's plaid. It's fearfully mysterious! I've solved one mystery. If only I could solve the second as well! This mystery has grown out of the first. I wonder on what track the boys are working now? Oh! I hope it isn't the right track. I do so want to win the prize, not for myself," she added quickly. "We're all at one"—in her excitement she was chattering aloud, half to herself and half to the dog that was pattering at her side—"yes, Copper, we're all agreed, we six 'Spouts,' how we shall spend the money if we win it. They don't know of my latest discovery, at least, none of them save Ruth, for I hadn't a chance of telling any of them save her last night. Ruth is arranging for a 'Spout' meeting in 'rec.' time

to-morrow. Oh dear! what a lot I'll have to do to-morrow, such a lot, Copper!" and she stroked his head. "Before the meeting takes place I have to find the cups." She had been so occupied with her soliloquy that she had not noticed that the Lonely Farm had come into sight.

"Oh, there it is!" she said, and she paused to stroke Copper's head. She bent down and kissed the wrinkles on his forehead.

"No, I'm not feeling the least bit funky," she asserted. She was speaking rather to reassure herself. "He's only an old man, and perhaps he's not as cross as people make him out to be. Still, all the same"—she had thrown her arm round Copper's neck—"I rather wish that I was coming back instead of going."

"I wonder if you'll forget all about me?" she said. "I suppose you will. Those lodgers, are they kind to you? Does the woman feed you with little scraps? Oh, Copper! if only you could speak you might be able to tell me why they're lingering here."

But all that Copper could do was to lick Aggie's cheek with his great red tongue.

She was still some distance from the Lonely Farm. She must not dally any longer. Peter would think she was a coward if he knew, and the "Spouts" weren't cowards!

"Come along," she said, "come along, good boy." She spoke as though it had been Copper and not herself who had lingered on the road.

Once again she glanced furtively towards the desolate house. As she did so, out from the broken gate two men walked briskly and turned in the direction of Rexford.

"Well," said Aggie as she caught sight of them, "lodgers *and* guests! It seems that the skinflint, after all, keeps open house."

Once she had made up her mind to go forward, she did not hesitate any longer. She did not even pause when she reached the ruin of the gateway through which the men had recently passed. Straight up to the front door she walked. And because she was feeling just a wee bit frightened, she knocked twice as loudly as she would have knocked on any other door. She had to knock a good many times before she received an answer, and then at length she heard shuffling steps coming down the flag-stoned hall.

The door was opened about an inch. Aggie saw no face, only one glittering blue eye. Then a quavering voice demanded "Who is there?"

"Me," said Aggie, and she leant against the door. She leant against it so heavily that she pushed it open and nearly knocked over the little man who was standing on its other side, and who was utterly unprepared for the onslaught. Aggie, having pushed the door open, walked boldly into the narrow passage which lay beyond it.

The old man was so stupefied at her audacity, as well as at seeing his dog in the possession of a girl, that for a moment he could not say one word.

The door of the room to the left stood open. It was the room into which the boys had been shown upon the previous day.

Into this room Aggie marched, and sat down upon a chair: she was so afraid that Peter might not consider a conversation in the hall a sufficient proof

of her bravery in facing one renowned to be of uncertain temper. Aggie still held Copper by the string. She leant back in the chair and swung her legs to and fro just as though she were feeling thoroughly at home. The old man stood gaping at her from the doorway.

He was more mystified than ever at this strange girl who had swooped down upon him, and who had calmly installed herself in his front room. The moment Aggie had entered that room she had looked for a sign of feminine occupation. She had seen none.

"I'm taking a little rest after my long walk," she said. "I've brought your dog back. My brother had to go out to tea, or he would have come himself. Nice view you have from here!" she added grandly, and she waved her hand towards the window, from which nothing but an untidy garden was visible.

Between his teeth the old man had begun to gibber something, but Aggie paid no attention when he tried to talk; she just swung her feet more vigorously, and leaned more unconcernedly against the back of her chair.

She took off her hat and threw it on the table; then she ran her fingers through her hair.

"What time do you have tea?" she asked. But this was too much for the skinflint.

"Tea! tea!" he stormed. "How could a poor man, with scarcely enough to keep body and soul together, have tea? Tea! tea!" he kept on muttering, "and with others to feed in the house besides myself."

"Oh, so there are others in this house?" said Aggie.

The old man had advanced into the room. Copper was crouching down at her side.

"I wonder how many others?" she said.

"Two—two others," muttered the miser.

"Oh, two others!" repeated Aggie slowly.

She got down from her chair and stretched her hand out for her hat. The old man was watching her every movement. It seemed to Aggie that he was as sparing with his words as with his hospitality. She walked quite leisurely towards the window.

"Yes," she said. She wasn't even looking out; she was looking down at the worn carpet. "You really have a remarkably fine view." She was crazy to learn more respecting those lodgers. She must walk warily. She turned round very slowly, and she seemed more interested in the toe of her own boot than in anything else.

"But how sad for you to have extra people to feed when you are so poor!" she murmured, speaking in her most sympathetic voice.

The miser had detected the note of sympathy. It occurred to him that if he were to make a good tale of the affair, help might possibly be offered; this strange young lady might give him money! Even as he thought of money his eyes lit up, and he clasped and unclasped his thin dry hand.

"It—it is a very great tax on me," he whined. "Ever since Friday, the day on which they came to me, I have had to go supperless. To-day I have gone dinnerless. I am starving—starving!"

"So they came to you on Friday?" said Aggie. It was on Friday that she had found the hut in ruins. The vagrants, left homeless by the storm, had sought refuge at the Lonely Farm.

"It's a deal they want," he drivelled on, "a deal they want beside their food! They were asking me last night for pen and ink—expensive ink; and to-day it was stamps they must have, two penny stamps and a halfpenny. Ah! but it's terrible to be as poor as I am!"

"It is very terrible, indeed," said Aggie. But somehow she did not sound quite so sympathetic now. She was walking from the window to the door. The old man saw that she was about to leave, and apparently without giving him so much as a penny!

"Two great hungry men to feed!" he whimpered.

"Two great hungry men?" said Aggie. His words had arrested her attention. "But—but," she said, "your lodgers, are they not a man and a woman?"

"There's no woman lodging in my house," he said.

"No woman?" Aggie gasped. Tears of disappointment had rushed into her eyes.

"There's no woman lodging in my house," he persisted. "My lodgers are men—two men—carpenters in Rexford, earning good wages, but paying me next to nothing—next to nothing for all the food they eat."

Where was the woman with the shawl of shepherd's plaid for whom Aggie had come in search? Not at the Lonely Farm, at all events. It had been a horrible mistake! She was still as far from finding the vagrants as she had been when she had stood facing the debris that had once been their shelter.

The miser tried to block her way. But she pushed past him. She threw a hasty kiss to Copper, who was till crouching by the chair. Then she rushed as

unceremoniously out of the house as she had entered it.

But the skinflint was not going to let her escape so easily. It had not been sympathetic words alone that he had wanted; he wanted something more tangible.

"A poor, starving old man!" he called out after her, in his penetrating voice. "A copper now! A copper!"

Aggie turned at the gate. Deliberately she misunderstood the whining miser.

"I left a Copper in the room," she said. "I should advise you to look on the floor beside the chair on which I sat."

Back into the room the miser hurried. For a long while he groped upon the floor, feeling the thin worn carpet with attenuated fingers, longing for that moment when his body might be thrilled through and through by the touch of that something cold. He groped until at last his hand did come in contact with something cold. For one moment he felt that thrill—for one moment only. His hand had come in contact with the nose of his sleeping dog.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### FORBIDDEN GROUND

Those vagrants were the most elusive people Aggie had ever known. Once again she must resign herself to the inevitable, she concluded; must content

herself, she decided, with having solved the mystery which, after all, was the only mystery she had been asked to solve.

At the meeting on Monday she decided that, in addition to identifying the burglar, she would tell the Colonel all about the vagrants. Perhaps he would be able to throw some light on the subject. After all, if she could not find the vagrants, there was yet something else she had to find. She must find the silver cups and the salver.

Instead of returning to the White House, though it was now past her tea-time, she went, on leaving the woods, along the Oak Tree pathway which led into the Woodbourne garden.

Apparently the Colonel was in the drawing-room, for Aggie could see a light burning in the room; she also gathered that he was not alone as she mounted the steps, for she could hear voices.

She did not trouble to ring the bell. The door was unbolted, so she walked into the house.

Above the other voices, she could hear the Colonel's. She would not go into the drawing-room until she had found out who his guests might be. She would seek this information from McAron.

She was sure that she would find McAron in his sitting-room, for long ago the Colonel had given him a tiny slip of a room to call his very own. This room contained little furniture save a couple of chairs, a table, and a cupboard in which McAron stored his very personal possessions.

McAron's sanctum lay beyond the green-baize door which led down into the kitchen. Through the baize door Aggie went, and tapped at the door of McAron's room.

"Come in," McAron said.

Aggie went into the room.

"It's only me," she announced as McAron shuffled to his feet.

"Oh! don't trouble," she exclaimed as she perched herself upon the table. "Who's in the drawing-room?"

"Master Peter and Master Henry," said McAron.

"Oh! bother!" Aggie groaned.

What were Peter and Henry doing at Woodbourne? she wondered. Could they be on the right trail after all? More than ever, she decided, she must give them a false clue.

"No more clocks and cups disappeared lately?" she inquired.

"Thank goodness, no!" McAron answered fervently.

"I want you to tell me," she continued, pressing her chin into the palms of her hands, "what you yourself think exactly about the robberies."

"What I think?" McAron said uneasily.

"Have you any notion who's done it?" she persisted. "Have you the least idea where those cups could be at the present moment? Do you think, now, that they would be stored away in somebody's cupboard?"

"In somebody's cupboard?" he said. "Oh! I am sure that a thief wouldn't keep cups in a cupboard."

"Oh! you never know," said Aggie lightly. "Now a cupboard such as that"—and she pointed to the one which contained McAron's possessions—"a cupboard like that would be a grand place, wouldn't it, in which to store stolen goods? It's so nice and big and roomy. You remember you let me hide in it a few

weeks ago when we were playing 'I spy.' You don't think, I suppose," she added, "that the clock might be in Rexford?"

"Well, it might be, Miss, of course," McAron said.

"I thought you would agree with me in that," replied Aggie promptly.

And then Aggie stirred. The green-baize door had been opened and had been closed again. She heard steps coming down the passage. She heard Peter's voice.

"He mustn't find me here," Aggie cried aghast. "I've come on private business, and he mustn't know I've been to Woodbourne. I'll hide in that cupboard," she exclaimed, "until the boys have gone."

She made a dive towards the cupboard, but McAron was before her. He caught hold of Aggie quite roughly, and pulled her back by the collar of her blouse.

"You're not to go near that cupboard, Miss," he said.

"But why?" said Aggie rebelliously, as she tried in vain to free herself from McAron's detaining grasp. "You let me hide there two weeks ago; you didn't mind a bit then."

"If you want to hide anywhere, you can hide underneath there," said McAron, and he pushed Aggie with scant ceremony underneath the table, and lowered the cloth that she might be completely hidden from view.

He only lowered it just in time, for as he did so Peter knocked on the door, and having knocked, he pushed it open.

"We don't want to disturb you," he explained, "but the Colonel said that he gave you the new Rule

Cards for our Club Room. He wants us to have them to-night."

McAron had left those Rule Cards up-stairs in his bedroom. He gave a hasty glance towards the cupboard. Never before had he so much wished that there had been a key for that cupboard; but with the boys in the room, Aggie's unconscious gaolers, its contents must surely be safe from her prying eyes.

"If you'll come in here and wait until I come back I'll fetch them down for you," he said.

The boys were nothing loath to wait in McAron's sanctum until McAron returned.

Peter sat on the edge of the table, just where Aggie had sat. As Aggie had done, he swung his long legs to and fro, and poor Aggie, underneath the table, felt she might be kicked at any moment.

Then Peter began to talk to Lambert. For one moment Aggie suffered dreadful qualms. If they should talk of things she was not meant to hear, then she would have to reveal her presence, for a "Spout" could not eavesdrop. Fortunately, however, their conversation was quite general.

"I wish he'd be quick," Peter fretted. "In another minute we shall have to go to Evensong. Wasn't it jolly this afternoon at Stewart's? His uncle is a brick."

"Here he is," said Lambert. McAron had come hurrying down the passage. He had found the cards for which the boys had asked.

Peter vaulted from the table. As he did so, he nearly pulled the cloth to the ground. McAron only just caught hold of it in time.

"Very fine thing in cloths you have," said Lambert as he went up preparing to examine it.

"Yes, yes," said McAron, "but you'd better be going now. It must be nearly church-time."

When the boys had left the room and had safely closed the green-baize door behind them, Aggie crept out from her ignominious position.

A moment or two later she heard them shut the hall door. The boys had left the house. Then Aggie bounced out of McAron's room.

"Perhaps next time I want to hide in your cupboard you will allow me to do so," she announced. "May you be undisturbed for the rest of the evening!" she added as she, in her turn, closed the door behind her.

"'Um," she said, as she walked along the corridor, "more easily and satisfactorily solved than I had anticipated."

The Colonel was alone now. She turned the handle of the door and walked into the drawing-room.

The Colonel had settled down to read again. His plans were finished—were safely hidden in the upholstery of the ottoman, where they would remain until he cut them out on the following Tuesday morning, to carry them himself to London. It was a long time since he had been able to sit down to read.

"Hullo! so it's you now?" he said as he caught sight of Aggie.

Aggie, recollecting his superior position, gave him the full salute.

"Still keen on scouting, I perceive," he said.

"Rather!" said Aggie.

"If you've come to tell me anything about the wonderful discoveries you've made"—and he put his hand up so that she might not see that he was laughing—"I won't hear a word about them until to-

morrow. I told Peter and Henry so this afternoon. Not one word of information will I hear from Scouts or——"

"Spouts," joined in Aggie promptly.

"Until to-morrow."

"So Peter and Henry have been here," said Aggie as she walked towards the window. "What did they want?"

"Only came to pay a friendly little visit," the Colonel explained, "and to fetch away some new cards for the Club Room. Poor boys! I wonder when their room will be furnished!"

"If they find the burglars by to-morrow," said Aggie, "it could be furnished at once. I wonder what they have discovered!" she mused on.

"You will hear at the meeting," was the only answer that the Colonel made. "To-morrow I have to go to Rexford," he continued, "in the early afternoon. I am not going to risk missing the train home. I am driving both ways. It would be dreadful if I were to be late."

"Dreadful!" said Aggie. "You haven't told the boys," she inquired, "that we girls are coming to the meeting, have you? You haven't told them about our Secret Service Patrol?"

The Colonel assured her that he had kept her secret inviolate.

"To-morrow will be a day of surprises," he said jokingly.

"Yes," said Aggie, "to-morrow will be a day of many surprises."

Aggie had walked towards the window.

"Why, it's getting quite dark out of doors," she said. "Wouldn't you like me to pull down the

blind ? " for though the lamp had been lit some time the blind had not been drawn.

Without waiting for the Colonel's permission, Aggie rattled down the blind. All at once the cord which she was holding in her hand slackened.

" Oh ! I say," she gasped, " I'm most dreadfully sorry, but I'm afraid I've broken it ! "

She stepped back that the Colonel might see what damage she had done. Aggie was very penitent indeed.

" Don't you worry, little girl," he said as he came and put his hand on her shoulder, " I can easily get it mended."

" If you were to write to Rogers to-night, he would send a man in the morning. I'll post the letter for you on my way home."

" I'm afraid it's too late to catch this evening's post," he said, " but when I am in Rexford to-morrow I will tell them to send out a man to attend to it. There's the back gate to be mended as well. Bryant found it broken on Saturday morning. I suppose they'll send two men out, one for each job. We shall have to wait till the Scouts become men, and then there will be no more slacksters among the British artisans."

When Aggie heard that it was after post-time, she was simply horrified. She had no idea it was so late. She prepared to hurry home.

The hat which should have been on her head was swinging over her arm. The coat which should have been on her back she was dragging on the ground.

" Till to-morrow," she exclaimed. " Who knows what gigantic revelations may not be made at five-o'clock to-morrow ! "

## CHAPTER XLIV

### A FAITHLESS BABETTE

By the time Aggie reached home she was feeling very hungry. On Sunday night supper was not laid till eight, but she knew if she were to coax Nannie very hard she would give her a piece of bread and butter and a glass of milk.

She ran up the stairs calling at the top of her voice, "Nannie, Nannie"; and no sooner did Nannie hear Aggie's shrill pipe than she came out to see what her pet charge wanted. Aggie sidled up to Nannie.

"Nannie," she said, and she tucked her hands through her nurse's arm, "it's pretty awful, isn't it, to be hungry?"

"Oh! Miss Aggie, Miss Aggie," said Nannie, who was never deceived by Aggie's little wiles, "why weren't you in to tea?"

"I couldn't manage it," said Aggie grandly. "I had fearfully important things on hand."

"You know," said Nannie weakly, shaking her finger and trying to be firm, "as you weren't in to tea I ought to make you wait until supper-time, like any other Nannie would. Do you fancy white bread or brown, Miss Aggie, dear?" she added, "and perhaps, as Cookie's out, I shall be able to find some blackberry jam in the cupboard. You do love blackberry jam, don't you, Miss Aggie?"

"Not so much as I love you, my Nannie," Aggie piped in promptly.

"Oh! you little sweedler, you little sweedler!"

Nannie took the brown cloak she was carrying on her arm to hang it away in Aggie's wardrobe.

As she did so, she noticed the rent which Aggie had made in it on the previous Friday night.

"There, there," she said as she showed it reprovingly to Aggie. "Was there ever such a destructive girl before? To-morrow I'm going to have a good turn out of all your things, yes, I am, rubbish drawer and all."

Then she went down-stairs to get the bread and butter.

"I suppose you're thirsty, too?" she said.

"Of course I am."

"There's a jug of cold water on the nursery shelf."

"Cold water isn't very satisfying," said Aggie knowingly.

"That's all you'll get to-night." Then half-way down the stairs Nannie paused. "Would you like your milk hot, or cold?" she asked.

"Hot, please," said Aggie promptly.

Aggie went into her bedroom.

If Nannie were really going to turn out the rubbish drawer it would be well if she, Aggie, were to examine its contents in case there were any treasures that she did not wish to fall into alien hands. She knelt down by the drawer and pulled it open.

She began to examine its contents. The first thing that she came across was the doll Babette. The poor doll had been damaged by its first appearance on the "boards." Its face had been cracked and its eyes knocked in. When Aggie shook Babette she could hear the doll's eyes rattling inside its head.

"I wish I could get them out," she said. She took a long knitting-needle off her dressing-table and began to poke about with it through the slits. She held the

doll tucked underneath her arm while she proceeded with this operation. Sometimes she could reach the roving eyes with the point of her needle, and sometimes they would escape her altogether.

Then the most extraordinary thing happened. Babette's head began to turn round. Aggie thought at first that she had broken it, but on further examination it seemed as though it had been made to screw on and off. Aggie screwed it round and round until she held the body in one hand and the head in the other.

Into that now headless body she peered. The doll was not stuffed with sawdust. It was stuffed with a roll of papers, and so large was the opening that Aggie slipped her hand into the body and pulled out its hidden contents.

"Miss Aggie," Nannie cried, "I've put your milk on the schoolroom table. I've put a nice piece of plum-cake with it, the kind you like, full of raisins."

Then Nannie went back to her own room.

Even as Aggie had forgotten her tea, so she now forgot this impromptu meal which had been prepared at her own supplication. She was absorbed in the papers she had taken from Babette.

There were sketches of Chimney House, of Woodbourne, of the hut within the wood, but she passed these by with but a casual glance. Her attention had been arrested by a sketch numbered 7.

This sketch was of an interior. The interior which had been drawn was that of the Colonel's library. There was the ottoman, and the ottoman was marked by a tiny cross. What did it all mean? Something that those vagrants wanted must be in that ottoman, Aggie decided—must be in that portion of the ottoman which they had marked with the cross.

What was it? What could it be? If only she might discover!

"Miss Aggie, Miss Aggie."

Aggie, at the sound of Nannie's voice, hastily pushed the papers back inside the doll. She restored Babette to her rubbish drawer.

Nannie cried out from her room again. She had gone down to the schoolroom.

"Your milk is getting quite cold. Poor child, you must be starving!"

## CHAPTER XLV

### ANONYMOUS INFORMATION

It had been a very long service, so Aggie had nearly finished her second supper when Peter came rushing into the room.

Aggie noticed that Peter looked excited. His cheeks were pinker than ever. She, too, was excited over Babette; but when Aggie was really excited she became very self-contained, only her eyes flashed more brightly. Peter had a reason to be excited. Something had happened after church.

"I went," Aggie cried the moment Peter burst into the room.

"Went where?" said Peter. He had forgotten all about Aggie's proposed visit to the Lonely Farm.

"I went, as I said I'd go, to call upon the miser. And, oh, Peter!"—Aggie burst out laughing at the remembrance of the incident—"I left the old skinflint grovelling for a copper on the floor. I told him

there was one beside the chair on which I had been sitting. The Copper which I meant was his own hound, of course."

Peter thoroughly enjoyed the joke.

"You really are a plucky one!" he said. "If you weren't a girl you might be a Scout. I shouldn't mind having you in my own Patrol."

"As I told you once before," Aggie made reply, "there can be Girl Scouts just as well as Boy Scouts. Did you have a nice afternoon at Stewart's?" she continued, changing the subject because it suited her to do so.

"Rather!" said Peter. "Stewart's uncle was nearly as keen as the Colonel on hearing about the 'Panthers.' He said that he thought the Boy Scout movement was just splendid, and that Scouts who really cared for scouting and kept the Scout Law to the letter would make men that England would be proud of in the future. He told us a lot about the Chief—B. P., I mean."

Aggie sniffed to herself. As if she hadn't known who the Chief was!

At the mention of the revered name, Aggie as well as Peter had saluted. For a moment Peter hadn't quite realized what Aggie had been doing. Then it suddenly dawned on him that Aggie was giving the salute, the real proper salute. He turned upon her quickly.

"What made you do that?" he inquired.

"Well, aren't I——?" began Aggie. She hesitated, stumbled. "Well, am I not, too, a great admirer of General Baden-Powell?"

"Any one who is the least bit decent must be," Peter allowed grandly. "We Scouts are fearfully keen on him, and we have every cause to be."

"Yes, haven't we?" said Aggie.

"We Scouts, I said," objected Peter.

"Did you talk at all about the burglars this afternoon?" she went on, again changing the subject.

"We tried to, but the Colonel said he wouldn't hear a word until to-morrow's meeting."

"Oh, so you've been to see the Colonel?" said Aggie, feigning ignorance.

She was boiling Peter's cocoa so as to make it nice and hot.

"Perhaps there'll be more burglaries in Ashleigh soon?" she suggested.

"Maybe there will, maybe there won't," said Peter as he took the cup from Aggie and dropped into it a plentiful supply of sugar.

"Suppose they were to burgle our house!" she reflected.

"I'd like to catch 'em!" Peter answered.

"Most likely you wouldn't catch 'em. You'd sleep too soundly, I expect." She did not wait to hear what answer Peter would make, she floundered out of the room.

Peter took something from his pocket. The something was a folded piece of paper which had been slipped into his hand in the darkness. Now that Aggie had left the room he spread the priceless sheet before him on the table. He read it through again. It must have been sent by some anonymous friend who wished to aid them in their search. It was thus the message ran—

"Watch Woodbourne Gates, Between 4.30 and 5.0 To-morrow, Monday Afternoon."

## CHAPTER XLVI

### AN AMATEUR BURGLAR

A LITTLE while later Aggie came into the schoolroom to say good-night to Peter. Peter was writing a post card to Rogers to ask him for a furniture catalogue.

Aggie peered over Peter's shoulder.

"Writing to Rogers?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," he said, "about the furniture for the Club Room."

"So you're quite certain you're going to get the prize?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if we did," Peter answered.

Upon leaving the room Aggie paused.

"Peter," she said, "you might leave your door open to-night, and I'll leave mine open too."

"Funky?" asked Peter.

"Well, you never know who may be burgled next?" she said evasively.

Aggie undressed quickly and slipped into bed.

"I do hope I shall wake at twelve," she said, "or somewhere round about there."

She sat up in bed and knocked her head three times against the wall, because she remembered that if you knock your head three times against the wall you're sure to wake up at the hour you want.

"Twelve!" she said as she knocked her head.

"Twelve!" she repeated as she knocked it a second time.

"Twelve!" she cried for the third time.

"Oh, but I bumped it rather hard then," she said quickly, as she rubbed the bruised spot.

Then she laid her head down on the pillow; and, tired out with the excitement of the day, no sooner had she done so than she fell fast asleep.

Despite the "head-knocking rite," it was nearly four o'clock when Aggie wakened. Dawn was just breaking. Aggie, in the grey light, could discern outlines.

She crept out of bed. While she had been undressing Aggie had mapped out her plan of action. She slipped on her blue dressing-gown. She did not put on her bedroom slippers. Burglars did not wear bedroom slippers!

Peter's room was opposite to hers. But it was not to Peter's room she went, it was to her father's dressing-room, which lay at the further end of the corridor.

She opened the door very gently. Not that she was really afraid of being overheard, for Nannie and the servants slept on the floor overhead; as for Peter, they always said that if the house fell down it wouldn't wake him!

In her father's dressing-room stood a chest in which her father kept his boots. Aggie looked at them critically. She took out one pair. They were the ones her father wore to church on Sunday. She put them back; they were too light to serve her purpose. The next pair which came to hand were her father's golfing boots; they were nailed. She chuckled as she secured the pair which stood next to them. They were thick walking shoes.

Holding the boots and shoes in her hand, Aggie, still barefooted, crept down the stairs into the hall.

She opened the hall door.

"It's a good thing mummie isn't at home," she

reflected. "She's such a light sleeper she would hear every sound."

When she reached the porch she paused. It was cold! But a "Spout" could not concern herself as to whether it was cold or not. She sat down on the steps. She looked such a quaint little figure with two very skimpy pigtails, the one tied with red braid and the other with a bootlace.

She put her feet into the golfing boots, and she thrust a hand into each shoe. Then, down on all fours she went; and on all fours she made her way along the drive towards the gate, and up the drive again towards the house. She left behind her a trail of large-sized footmarks.

She made her way past the hall door round to the backyard. Here she stood erect, for the backyard was flagged.

Beyond the backyard stood the potting-shed. Outside this potting-shed a ladder stood. Not a very long ladder but one which would reach up to the first-floor windows, and Peter's room was on the first floor.

To carry the ladder she was obliged to take off the shoes she was wearing on her hands. She tucked them underneath her arm, and underneath her other arm she tucked the ladder. She did not feel in the least bit frightened; she was enjoying herself immensely.

Back to the front of the house she went. On the doorstep she laid down the shoes. With her now empty hands she took the ladder and leaned it up against the open window of Peter's room. She nearly whistled, she was feeling so gloriously happy! She restrained herself in time.

She put the shoes back on to her hands. Her feet slip-slopped inside the golfing boots. Once again,

down on all fours she went and prowled round the foot of the ladder.

It was growing lighter. She had nearly finished her work out of doors. She tossed her pigtails back as she sat down on the steps again, this time to take off the boots and not to put them on.

She returned to the house. She locked and bolted the door behind her, just as she had found it locked and bolted when she had come down. She went up to the dressing-room from which she had borrowed the boots and shoes. These she restored to the chest from which she had taken them. Then she went, not back to her own room, but into Peter's.

Peter was fast asleep in bed. Peter was snoring. Oh! how often had Peter vowed that he never snored!

On the dressing-table lay Peter's watch and chain. How proud Peter was of that watch and chain! It was quite a recent acquisition, for his uncle had given it to him on his birthday. In a corner stood another of Peter's treasures—his cricket bat. That was a veteran possession.

Then Aggie nearly doubled herself up with laughter. The most lovely idea had occurred to her. She would pay Peter out for having said girls could not scout.

Aggie tiptoed over to where the wardrobe stood. In the wardrobe lay Peter's suits—every suit he possessed; his Etons, his school suits, his cricketing and football clothes, his Scout uniform, and his riding-breeches.

Aggie took these suits out one by one and tucked them underneath her arm, regardless of creases and folds. She took away every suit except the Etons. Peter would have to go to school next morning in his Eton suit!

Peter turned. Aggie bent down quickly. Peter had only turned in his sleep, however. To Aggie's great relief once again he began to snore.

She went towards his wardrobe. Very nervously, fearful lest it should creak, she pulled out the bottom drawer—his rubbish drawer. From this drawer she took her own red sash. "Two days ago," she said, "I'd have given anything to have had you once more in my possession."

Having tied the red sash round her waist she crossed over to the washing-stand. She dipped her fingers into Peter's jug. After carrying the ladder they were already far from clean. Upon the white paint of the window-sill she made a dirty trail. Very cautiously, lest she should be heard, she lit the candle and held it upside down over the window-sill so that the grease might fall on to the stone. Then she blew out the candle. All at once she made a quick movement forward. Yet another idea had occurred to her.

Back to her father's dressing-room she went. She fetched out the golfing boots and the walking shoes which she had borrowed before. They were caked, as she had hoped they would be caked, with mud.

Carrying them in her hands, she crept back to Peter's room. She went straight to the window for the third time and last. From the window, on tiptoe, she walked across to Peter's bed, and as she walked she flicked off with her fingers the little bits of mud which were clinging to the sides of those boots and shoes. Where she had passed a muddy trail was left.

Her work was done. She surveyed it with pride. To replace those boots and shoes again took not a moment.

Up to the boxroom Aggie went with the suits she had taken from her brother's room. She hid them, together with the cricket bat, in an old and disused wooden box. The watch and chain she locked away in her own jewel-case. The sash she stored in her school satchel.

Then back she stole to her bed, and laughing at her first attempt at burglary, she cuggled down beneath the clothes and fell fast asleep.

## CHAPTER XLVII

### A SUCCESSFUL RUSE

Aggie slept on placidly until she was awakened by some one standing at the end of her bed, screaming at her loudly. That some one was Peter—Peter with a white face, wrapped in his dressing-gown.

"Aggie! Ag!" he was shrieking. "Wake up! wake up! Some people do sleep soundly."

"Ye-s," said Aggie, opening one eye drowsily, "some people do sleep soundly!"

"There's been a burglary!" gasped Peter.

"Where?" asked Aggie.

"Here, you little silly! Here, at our own house."

"In the night?" she was still pretending she was only half awake. "And you—you caught the—burglars, dear, brave Peter?"

"But I didn't catch them," Peter said. "I thought you might have heard something?"

"I? Oh, but I'm not a light sleeper, like you. I never heard a sound."

She was sitting up in bed now. The pigtail, which should have been tied up with the bootlace, was hanging loose. Aggie looked down anxiously among the bed-clothes to see if she could see it there. Suppose she were to have dropped it in Peter's room?

"Did they take anything?" she asked. "Which way did they come in?"

"Take anything?" said Peter. "I should think they did! They've taken my watch and chain and my cricket bat. I call it pretty strong when they come to taking one's own things. I shall put it in the hands of the police, I shall."

"Well," said Aggie, "the police don't seem to have done much good as far as the Woodbourne robberies are concerned."

"The burglars didn't make off with the Colonel's cricket bat and his watch and chain!" Peter grumbled on.

"But haven't they taken anything except your cricket bat and your watch and chain?"

"Not as far as I can see. I've scoured the house pretty well. I expect something scared them away after they'd got into my room."

"Did they come in through the front door?" asked Aggie, "or the back?"

"They came in through my window," Peter cried.

"But what a high jump!"

"Jump!" scorned Peter. "They got the ladder from the potting-shed. There were two of them."

"Two ladders?" said Aggie.

"No, two burglars I mean, of course. The moment I found the ladder and saw that my things were missing I put on my dressing-gown and went down to look for 'sign.' There were two distinct footmarks on the drive. One was made by a man

wearing nailed boots, and the other by a man wearing brogues. The minute I've finished breakfast I'm going to collect the Patrol. Tell the police ? " said Peter suddenly. " No, after all, I won't tell the police. The ' Panthers ' have now a certain clue of which the police shall be in ignorance until to-night, at all events. If only we can track down the burglars before the meeting takes place this evening ! "

Evidently, thought Aggie, Peter had not as yet made the greatest discovery of all !

" It was funny you didn't waken ? " said Aggie.

Peter winced. He did not like this homethrust. He did not tell Aggie that some one must have been close beside his bed, for there had been a muddy trail left on the carpet.

" I wonder if they brought any light into the room ? "

" They had a candle," Peter answered promptly.

" But how do you know they had a candle when you didn't see them ? "

" There were grease-spots on the window-sill. And somebody left that behind him, too," said Peter, and he pulled out a bootlace and threw it on to Aggie's bed.

" A funny thing to leave behind one, I must say."

" I suppose it must have been to tie up something ? "

" Oh yes," said Aggie. " I'm quite sure that last night's burglar used the bootlace to tie up something."

" Well, I must be getting dressed now. It's late enough as it is. This is going to be a busy day for me," Peter continued importantly.

He went back into his own room. Two minutes later, before Aggie had got out of bed, he was back again

" Ag ! Ag ! " he screamed. She hadn't time to

say "Come in"; he had burst into the room. "They've taken all my suits—they've taken everything except my Etons!"

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### RESTORATION

THERE was terrible consternation at the White House when it was announced that Master Peter's room had been burgled in the night—that all Master Peter's clothes had been stolen. Nannie was all for sending in to Rexford to buy the "precious lamb" something to wear to school, but Aggie was quite shocked at the idea; nothing, she was quite sure, should be done until her parents returned that evening.

"Peter'll have to go to school in his Etons," she said firmly.

But when Peter appeared down at breakfast half an hour later, looking very wretched in those Etons, Aggie's conscience smote her, and she offered to run round to Lambert's house to borrow a suit from him.

Peter cheered up visibly. Aggie wasn't half a bad monkey! And Aggie very hastily unknotted the cord she was wearing round her neck.

"You see," Peter confided to her, "it would have been rotten to have had to stick in these old things all day."

"Yes, wouldn't it?" said Aggie. And having finished her breakfast she hurried off to Lambert's to

ask him to lend Peter a suit in which to go to school.

. . .

Peter was distinctly at a loose end when Aggie had left for Lambert's. He had a whole half-hour to spare, but he couldn't settle to anything.

He had already made a plan as to how the Scouts were to be posted that afternoon to watch round Woodbourne gates. If they were only to discover something, what a day of victory it would be for the Patrol! All Ashleigh, all Rexford would be singing the praises of the "Panthers." Perhaps, even in addition to the five pounds which would furnish the Room for the reception of the "Hyenas," some of the local magnates might make them handsome presents. There might even be a presentation to the Leader. Peter did not want that presentation to be anything personal. He wanted it to be something for them all, something for their Club Room. How about a beautifully framed portrait of the King? Yes, Peter thought that for his presentation he would ask for a framed portrait of the King.

Then Peter had a few moments of extreme virtue. He construed a little Virgil. Then, because he could not give his mind—it was too full of burglars—to Virgil, he once again went and surveyed the scene of the late burglary.

He could discover nothing new. The muddy trail on the floor had been cleared away, but the black finger-marks had not been washed off from the window-sill. It struck Peter that they were rather small finger-prints. "Just like foreigners to have such beastly little hands!" he said. He surveyed his own square fingers, his own broad-palmed hands, with true British pride.

He had an important piece of evidence to take to the meeting that afternoon, even though he could not carry finger-marks with him. That piece of evidence was the red silk sash.

He went to his rubbish drawer to fetch it out. It was not where he had left it. He hunted the drawer through; nowhere could he find the sash. "They—they've taken that, too, the beasts!" he exclaimed. "Oh, well," he said with resignation, "they seem to have done their work pretty thoroughly."

Then, because he could find nothing more which would help to elucidate the mystery in his own room, he went across into Aggie's.

Aggie's room was all in a muddle, for Nannie had kept her word: she had already begun to turn out that higgledy-piggledy rubbish drawer. All the things were lying on the floor where Nannie had left them when she had been called down-stairs to give some household directions. Lying on the top was the now tattered and despoiled Babette.

"Rotten old thing!" said Peter, and he tossed it into the air and caught it again; and a piece of Babette's cheek, which had been cracked on the night of Aggie's theatricals, fell out.

While Peter was examining the wounded Babette, some one rang the front-door bell. Peter, like Aggie, always rushed to hang over the banisters whenever that bell rang, for many people called whom Peter and Aggie liked to see.

But this was not any one whom Peter knew.

Standing on the steps he saw a stranger, wearing a shawl of shepherd's plaid, with a neat black costume, and a bonnet on her head in which lilies-of-the-valley trembled.

"If the young people in this house," the woman was saying in a queer, gruff voice as Peter arrived at the head of the stairs, "have any old toys they would care to give me for some poor children who have none in Rexford, I shall be very, very grateful. So often the better-class children do not know what to do with their old toys—do not know how much they are appreciated by those unhappy little folk who have none."

"I'm sorry," Batchelor was firm upon the subject, "but there is no one at home. All the toys in this household go to the village hospital."

"If only they could spare me some—some old rag doll?" said the tenacious visitor persuasively.

And then, down into the hall, nearly on to Batchelor's head, there came flying a great rag doll.

"Give her that to keep her quiet," said a voice from the upper landing.

The last words were spoken in an undertone, so that they reached Batchelor's ears only, and not those of the visitor on the doorstep.

Batchelor picked up the dirty tattered doll between his finger and his thumb. He was about to lay it aside on the table.

"Oh, but that's the very thing!" said the visitor, from the doorway stretching out her hands for the plaything. "How the dear little Mary Jane will dote on it! and the sweet little Charlotte Ann caress it!"

"It isn't fit to give to a dog," said Batchelor. "Master Peter's a very naughty boy to have thrown it down."

"But they would love it," persisted the visitor. "Poor little Mary Jane and Charlotte Ann, they have no toys at all!"

"Oh, well, if you like to take it, of course," said Batchelor. "It will be so much the less lumber in the house."

"Will you thank Master Peter—I think you said his name was Peter, didn't you—a thousand times for his generosity? Tell him," said the visitor as she turned to walk down the steps, clasping the precious plaything tightly in her arms, "that by the sight of this doll he will to-day have gladdened the hearts of two—of two who will be grateful to him for the rest of their lives."

No sooner had the Lady of the Lilies disappeared round the corner of the road than Aggie, with Lambert's suit in a parcel underneath her arm, came hurrying back from the opposite direction.

It was not until Peter had actually donned the suit and started off with Aggie to school that it occurred to him to relate to her the story of the doll. No sooner had he done so than Aggie stopped dead in the middle of the road and turned upon him as a little fury.

"What right had you to give my doll away?" she cried. "What right had you to give my doll away?"

"But it was only a ragged, dirty old thing," Peter said, really distressed that he had apparently disposed of something which Aggie seemed to value.

"And who did you give it to, I'd like to know?" She stamped her foot with anger.

"Oh, to some old beggarwoman wearing a shawl of shepherd's plaid."

"A shawl of shepherd's plaid!"

Then Aggie turned quite pale. She walked on, leaving Peter all alone in the middle of the road. She must think—think things out by herself. The

mysterious beggar had appeared again—had recaptured her lost property and the plans of the Woodbourne library which Aggie felt assured had been made for no good purpose. One thing was certain : she must tell the Colonel everything at the first available opportunity. She would not see him until that evening, for she recollected that he would have left for Rexford before she was out from school. There was something in that ottoman those vagrants wanted. Directly after luncheon, she determined, she would go to Woodbourne. She would make it her special duty to safeguard that ottoman and its contents until the Colonel should return.

. . . . .

The woman in the plaid shawl had walked some way along the road which led to Rexford. There stood on this road a house to let. The house lay well back in its own grounds. The woman, looking rather cautiously round her and observing no one in sight, turned in through the gates which led up to the front door. So overgrown were the trees and bushes that this front door was not visible from the road. Only the uppermost turrets could be seen by casual passers-by. Surely the woman could not be meditating the purchase of such a house ?

All day long one might have waited to see the woman, who had passed out but half an hour ago, and had now passed in again, come from the house. No woman passed through those gates again the day long. But some twenty minutes later there came whistling down the drive a bearded carpenter. It was more than an hour before that the carpenter had first entered the deserted dwelling-place. In his hand he was carrying a bag which apparently contained his tools. There were other things besides tools in that

bag, however. Underneath the hammers, chisels and pincers lay a shawl of shepherd's plaid, and wrapped up in that shawl was an old serge skirt, a tattered bonnet and a rag doll.

## CHAPTER XLIX

### THE MIDGE IN THE HONEY

Some of the "Spouts" had been quite incredulous when Aggie had first told them of the identity of the burglar.

"Oh, but he couldn't have done it!" B♯ said.

"Couldn't he!" said Aggie.

"I think he did," said Ruth.

And then gradually Aggie, who could always be persuasive, won every member of the Patrol over to her way of thinking.

"So the girls," she cried exultantly, "have beaten the boys and the police after all! The boys are off on to a false scent; a false scent," Aggie chuckled, "which I gave them mine own self!" And, very dramatically, she related the story of the previous night's burglary at the White House.

"But what about the vagrants?" asked Patty, "and the hut we found demolished in the woods?"

"That's quite another story," Aggie said, and she told them all about the papers which she had discovered in Babette; of the appearance of the vagrants at the theatricals, and of the beggarwoman that morning at her own house.

"Who knows," she said, "that, quite accidentally, we may not have stumbled upon some real and grave

danger which is threatening Woodbourne? Now that they have regained possession of the plans, I am uneasy in my mind until I have told the Colonel all we have discovered. The Colonel will be at home this morning, so they will not venture near the house. This afternoon, till he returns, I mean to be on guard. I wish I had told him everything long ago, but I so wanted to outwit the police and beat the boys; and it wasn't really until this morning—for you see I didn't find the plans until last night—that it occurred to me that Colonel Norton is being threatened by a danger of which he is, apparently, unaware. However, after five o'clock to-night," she said more cheerily, " everything will be all right, and nothing can happen before then; I mean to see to that myself. How surprised the boys will be to find us at the meeting! How surprised they will be when we produce the missing property, for that we are to produce that missing property I am quite determined. The cups and salver, I am sure, are shut up in McAron's cupboard. McAron will be at Chimney House this afternoon till half-past four. I mean to get those cups and salver into my possession. The clock is to arrive from Green, addressed to me.

" Clock, cups and salver I shall store away under the piano in the drawing-room. Ruth and Patty—Numbers 2 and 3, I mean," she corrected herself hastily—" shall take charge of the property until I have need of it. I shall send for McAron, and when I do so, you, Ruth and Patty, will know that the moment of disclosure is near at hand. Once he has closed the library door behind him, you two are to steal out from the drawing-room, where you will have been waiting all the while. You are to listen for my signal, and when I give the signal you are to

burst into the room carrying with you the lost clock, salver and cups. So shall the missing property be produced, when the dramatic moment arrives, at the metaphorical waving of my wand."

"But what is to be the signal?" Ruth inquired.

Aggie pondered for a moment. "I shall sneeze twice," she said at length, "like this," she explained. "Atishoo! atishoo! At the second 'atishoo' you will fling the door wide open."

"And all will be triumph, triumph, triumph for our Patrol!" cried Patty.

"All will be honour and glory for the 'Spouts'!" said Ruth.

"Oh! to see the boys' faces!" Joan exclaimed.

"No more weary toiling!" Phyllis smiled complacently.

"It's you, our Leader, who have done it all," said Ruth generously, and she turned to Aggie. "We should never have found the property if it hadn't been for you. Aggie!"—Ruth threw her arm round Aggie's neck—"Aggie! we're proud of you!"

Aggie's face had been wreathed in smiles; now a cloud overshadowed it.

"There's only one thing I could have wished," she said as the Patrol trooped back into the form-room, the bell summoning them to lessons having that moment rung, "that dear Herr-Monsieur might have been present. I wish that both he and his friend might have witnessed our triumph this evening!"

## CHAPTER L

### A RANDOM JEST

THE Colonel drove away from Woodbourne at half-past twelve, just as the girls were putting on their hats preparatory to leaving school; and at the same moment the second carpenter from the Lonely Farm put in a tardy appearance at the workshop of Messrs. A. S. Rogers & Sons in Rexford.

As the Colonel passed by this same workshop a very little later, he recollected his broken gate and blind. Both of these he wished to have repaired.

The workshop was piled with timber, and there was but one person in occupation when the Colonel entered the wooden shanty. This man was busily engaged in sawing great deal planks. He had a heavy beard and bushy eyebrows.

"Here, man," said the Colonel, and he tapped impatiently upon the floor with his foot, "is Mr. Rogers in?"

The man ceased his work, and touched his forehead submissively.

"Mr. Rogers isn't in," he said. "Perhaps you'd like to speak to Mr. Buckley?"

But the Colonel said he would not trouble Mr. Buckley. All he wanted was to leave a message. If the man would give that message it would suffice quite well. Would Mr. Rogers kindly send a man to Woodbourne, that afternoon if possible, to repair a gate and a blind which had been broken?

The carpenter assured the honoured customer that the message should be given without delay.

"Oh, by the way," said the Colonel as he turned to leave the shop, "you might tell Mr. Buckley that if

those little shelves I ordered a week or two ago are finished I'll call for them this afternoon. I'm in the town with my dog-cart. I shall be leaving Rexford at half-past four."

No sooner had the Colonel left the shop and driven away to keep his appointment with his solicitor than Mr. Buckley came back from his lunch.

"Feeling all right, now?" he said kindly to the man, who was again busy with the saw.

"Quite, sir," the man replied; but his voice was a little shaky as he spoke. He was acting up to the excuse he had made for his late arrival.

"Nobody's called, I suppose, while I was out?" Mr. Buckley asked as he sat down at his desk and pulled out an important-looking ledger.

"Colonel Norton called." Once again the man laid down his saw. "'E said there was several jobs at Woodbourne 'e wanted put to rights this afternoon. 'E asked particularly if I could be sent to look at 'em as soon as you was back?"

"Oh, well, if he wants you to go, you'd better go at once," said Mr. Buckley, eager to oblige; for the Colonel was a most important client.

"I suppose me mate can come along wi' me?" the bearded man said unconcernedly as he picked up his cap which was lying on the bench. "Maybe one pair of 'ands wouldn't be enough to attend to some of them jobs 'e wants doing."

"By all means," said Mr. Buckley. "By all means take your mate, and see to it that you give entire satisfaction."

"'E said summat, too," the bearded man continued, "h'about callin' for some shelves wot you was to have ready for 'im. He said 'e'd call for 'em at half-past four."

"Oh, the bookshelves!" said Mr. Buckley. "Mr. Rogers has already taken them. He had to attend a sale of furniture this afternoon at Ashleigh, and he said that he would leave the shelves himself on his way home."

The bearded man went out from the workshop. His mate was loafing in the yard with some of his companions. They had been eating greasy mutton sandwiches and sharing a "small Bass"—the "mate's" daily contribution to the midday feast.

The bearded man beckoned to his friend with his finger.

"We've to go to Woodbourne," he whispered, "to mend a blind and a gate."

"To Woodbourne?" said his mate, in a grumbly voice in which the slightest trace of a foreign accent was audible. "And 'ow are we goin' to git there, I'd like to know?"

"'Ow are ye goin' to git there?" roared his next-door neighbour, a burly Irishman, as he clapped him on the back. "Y'll 'ave to step it, y'll 'ave to step it like the rest of us! A good hour and forty minutes it'll be takin' ye, what's more!"

Then the neighbour, who was of a jocular disposition, burst into a hearty roar of laughter and rocked himself to and fro.

"Och, shure! and if he doesn't want an airship to take him there!"

"Oh, it's an airship that's taking him there without a doubt," said Herr-Monsieur to Don Qui in a whisper, as, with his bag slung over his shoulder, he went whistling from the yard.

## CHAPTER LI

### THE ROSE-COLOURED OTTOMAN

THE moment that Peter had started for school that afternoon Aggie dashed up-stairs. From her drawer she took his watch and chain and stuffed them into the pocket of her drill tunic. She had changed her serge school frock for this drill tunic after lunch. She also took out the red silk sash from her satchel, wrapped it up in a piece of paper, and tucked it underneath her arm. From the corner of her room she took her garden stick.

When she reached the road, Peter had long since passed out of sight. Peter, too, was busy with his own plans. He and the " Panthers " were to secrete themselves for their vigil at half-past four that afternoon, the hour at which they finished lessons. They were to hide behind the trees, and mark down every man, woman or child who passed in through the Woodbourne gates.

Aggie had a vigil of her own to keep. Her vigil was to take place in the Colonel's library.

When she reached Woodbourne she found that she must ring the bell, for the hall door was locked and the library window closed and bolted. McAron was out, and Mrs. Bryant came floundering up the stairs in answer to Aggie's summons.

" I've come to look for something," said Aggie evasively when the old woman opened the door to her.

" Oh, you'll find plenty of nice books on the drawing-room shelf, my dear," was Mrs. Bryant's answer. It was one of Mrs. Bryant's deaf days.

Aggie nodded her head. She went into the draw-

ing-room, and there she waited until Mrs. Bryant had shuffled back into the sanctity of her kitchen.

Aggie allowed her five minutes to settle down in her easy-chair. She knew Mrs. Bryant's ways. She knew that Mrs. Bryant always snuggled down in her easy-chair for an " after-luncheon " nap.

Then Aggie left the drawing-room and the books which she had never attempted to open. She crept through the baize door and closed it very carefully behind her.

The kitchen lay on her left, McAron's sanctum on her right. The kitchen door was shut. So, as a matter of fact, was the door into McAron's sanctum. But Aggie, knowing that McAron was at this moment safely installed at Chimney House, opened it without a qualm. She went straight towards the cupboard in which McAron had been so loath for her to hide upon the previous evening. She turned the handle. She opened it. Then she only smiled. She was not the least bit surprised. She would have been far more surprised had the contents for which she was searching been absent from those shelves.

On the shelf above her head stood four shining silver cups ; behind them, leaning up against the wall, was the missing salver.

To reach the cups Aggie was obliged to stand upon a chair. Into the skirt of her tunic, which she had gathered up so as to make a bag, she dropped the cups one by one. She reached up for the salver, and tucked it underneath her arm.

Then she jumped down to the floor and placed the cups upon the salver. Then she carried cups and tray into the drawing-room, having taken the precaution to leave all the doors closed as she had found them.

She was about to store away the booty underneath the piano when she was attracted by the sound of footsteps on the gravel.

She ran towards the window and looked out. The anæmic assistant from Green's shop was staggering up the drive carrying a large parcel in his arms.

Aggie ran to the front door. She opened it herself.

"It is Miss Phillips, isn't it?" he inquired just as he had inquired in the shop. "I was to give this parcel into Miss Agnes Phillips' hands."

And Aggie took the parcel from the assistant, who was only too glad to get rid of it.

In the drawing-room Aggie unpacked the parcel.

"I wonder if you're glad to be home again, old clock?" she said. But the clock only ticked its answer, which might have been yea or nay.

Then Aggie laughed.

"I'm going to make you beautiful to celebrate the occasion," she announced, and she took the red silk sash from her pocket and draped it round the clock.

Then she placed the clock under the piano with the remainder of the lost property, in readiness for the dramatic climax she had planned. From the drawing-room she went across to the library. A cheerful fire was burning in the grate, for it was a chilly afternoon.

She walked straight towards the ottoman. She walked all round it, surveying it with an entirely new interest. The back was not upholstered, as the front, with rose-coloured chintz. It was of plain deal. There were even tiny chinks and crannies in the deal, through which Aggie peeped from idle curiosity. It was too dark within, however, for her to discern the contents through these natural peep-holes. She walked round to the front again; then she lifted the lid. As she did so, her heart beat rather

quickly. She scarcely knew what she expected to find within, for it must be something very wonderful since some one had thought it worth while to mark that portion of the Colonel's library, depicted in a hidden sketch, with an unmistakable cross.

There was nothing in the ottoman, however, save a few pieces of torn and discarded music. Rather crossly, she grabbed hold of the lid with both her hands to pull it down. As she did so, something crackled. It was something underneath her hand—something which apparently lay between the lid and its covering. The sound came from just the spot where, she recollected, the cross had been made in the plan she had found hidden in Babette's body.

She knelt down on the floor. If something had been stored in the upholstering the seam must have been opened to enable any one to place it there. Very closely she examined the seam. Yes, surely, where those papers had rustled the stitches were larger and more irregular—very different, in fact, from any other stitches in the upholstery.

Having found out so much, Aggie intended to investigate yet further. With her quick fingers she began to unrip the long and irregular stitches. As she did so, it occurred to her that were she to undo the seam she would be compelled to sew it up again, and how could she sew it up without a needle and cotton? She passed through the baize door and descended into the kitchen as fast as she could run.

But though her feet clattered on the brick floor Mrs. Bryant never heard one sound. Mrs. Bryant sat fast asleep in her easy chair. By her side there stood an open basket filled with needles and cottons. Out of this basket Aggie took a needle, which she threaded with a long piece of cotton. Without so

much as having caused Mrs. Bryant to turn or grow restless in her slumber, Aggie left the kitchen and went back to the library. Because her work was very private and important, she turned the key of the door, took it from the lock and slipped it into her pocket.

Then she finished unripping the alien stitches, and slipped her hand through the open seam. She could feel the edge of something which seemed to be a very bulky roll of papers. She began to pull it towards her. Very carefully and very cautiously, lest she should crush or tear it, she pulled, and at length brought to light an important-looking document tied round with red cord.

So it was papers that the vagrants wanted. What was so precious in these papers, she wondered, that the Colonel must keep them sewn up in an ottoman—that for days and days strangers, appearing now in this disguise, now in that, must lie in wait to get hold of them? On this point, however, Aggie's curiosity could not be satisfied—not for the moment, at all events. She would have scorned even to peep inside that roll which the Colonel had, for reasons of his own, kept secret from every one.

## CHAPTER LII

### RATS IN A TRAP

"Stop it, you two! Stop it, you two!"

Aggie had sewn up the slit in the ottoman. She had moved over to tidy the envelopes which were lying anyhow on Colonel Norton's writing-table, for she had disarranged them while fumbling in his note-paper rack. Then she went towards the ottoman

again to feel if the papers were in the same place, and to assure herself that the stitches she had made were as long and as irregular as those she had unripped.

"Down! down! Stop it, stop it!"

Aggie ran towards the window. The most gruesome sounds were coming from the lawn, where the Colonel's dogs, Jack and Orby, were engaged in a terrific fight. In a moment Aggie had seized the leash which was lying on the Colonel's mantelpiece.

She dashed out through the window, leaving it wide open.

"They'll kill each other! they'll kill each other! Oh, Bryant, stop them!" she cried out, and she lashed the fighting dogs with the whip, while Bryant rushed off at full speed to fetch a bucket of water to pour over them.

"Jack'll kill Orby, I know he will! He's rolled him over on his back. No, Orby's up again; he's bitten a hole through Jack's ear. Orby—Jack—Orby!" she yelled. "Stop it, stop it!" Again she lashed with the whip. Jack had Orby by the throat. "Bryant, Bryant!" she screamed. "Quick, quick, Jack's killing Orby!" She bent down to try and separate them with her hands.

"Stop that, Miss Aggie!" shouted Bryant, who had come from the stables weighed down on one side with the bucket of water he was carrying. "Don't you touch them! Don't you touch them! This'll settle them, I think."

And with that Bryant took up the bucket with both his hands and threw its contents over the militant dogs.

It had the desired effect. Jack released Orby. Both dogs retired from the field of battle to shake

themselves free of the water with which they had been drenched.

In an instant Aggie had clasped the leash on to Orby's collar. Bryant had secured Jack with a piece of rope.

"They're a bad lot," he said. "They're a bad lot. We'll take them round to the stable, Miss Aggie, and put them each into an empty loose-box. They may howl their heads off, but there they'll stay for the rest of the afternoon."

In a solemn procession the late enemies, both looking sadly woebegone, were led into the stable-yard. Aggie marched first with Orby; Bryant followed with Jack.

They had just passed out of sight when two men, evidently carpenters, walked up the drive.

Seeing the library window open, and knowing that the Colonel was in Rexford, the pair went straight into that room. Somehow, they must have thought it was the ottoman they had been ordered to repair, for it was towards it they made their way. But if this were the case, why had they thrown down their tools beside the desk?

After Aggie had helped Bryant to punish the offenders, she prevailed upon him to take her to see the puppies, for a new family of puppies had made its appearance the day before at Woodbourne.

They were darling, fluffy little puppies. Aggie stooped to pat them. As she knelt there by the box in which they stretched and wriggled she did not know quite what made her think of it, but she remembered all at once that she had left the door of the library locked and that the key was in her pocket.

Bryant had work to do in the stable-yard. Aggie left him and the puppies to run back to the house.

Just before she came to the open window she paused to take the key out of her pocket.

At that moment one of the two carpenters had taken from the ottoman, in whose upholstery he had made a rent, a bundle of papers.

"Footsteps!" he said quickly. In a flash he had turned towards the door. The door was locked!

Then the footsteps drew nearer.

Whose footsteps they were he knew not. He did not wish to be discovered in that room. He looked about him hastily for a place in which to hide until the owner of the footsteps had passed by the window. There was no hiding-place save the ottoman in which he had been searching, and the cupboard in the wall.

Aggie had found the key and had begun to run again.

"Were they to be trapped like rats? No——"

In an instant Herr-Monsieur had sprung into the empty ottoman. Don Qui had made a bolt for the cupboard.

And Aggie, as she entered the room, distinctly saw the door of the cupboard close on one man, and saw a second man disappear head first into the ottoman.

She did not hesitate. She actually walked into the library whistling. She picked up the bag of tools which was lying where the carpenters had thrown it. She sauntered down the room quite slowly, though her heart was beating rather more quickly than its wont, and her pulses were racing. She strolled to the door. She unlocked it. She left it open.

In the ottoman, Herr-Monsieur breathed a sigh of thankfulness. Whoever had entered the room had, apparently, left it again. Don Qui, in the cupboard, felt equally overjoyed. But no—the footsteps were returning. The somebody had apparently forgotten

something. Scarcely daring to breathe, the two men in their hiding-places remained securely hidden.

Aggie walked over to the cupboard. Very lightly, though her fingers quivered as she did so, she turned the key in the lock. Then she went back to the ottoman, and perched herself upon it. So long as she sat there, whoever was within it could not possibly escape. She curled her arms around her knee, swung her legs to and fro, and drummed her heels very unconcernedly against the wooden sides of the chest.

She continued to whistle as she began to inspect the contents of the bag which she had confiscated. Then she nearly jumped off the ottoman in her excitement. Out of the bag she had drawn a shawl of shepherd's plaid; and wrapped up in the shawl was a serge skirt, a tattered bonnet, and the doll Babette which Peter had given away so hurriedly that very morning.

So the prisoners in the cupboard and the ottoman were the vagrants she had been tracking down for days. But they were both men. This was perplexing, for the quarry she had desired to find, the quarry which Pearson had seen first outside Woodbourne gates, and Mrs. Gale had met at the Willows on Saturday night, had been a man and a woman. What was it that Pearson had said about the latter when Aggie had begged for information? "She looked mostways like a woman." "Looked mostways like a woman!" Aggie said the words very slowly over to herself. Perhaps she had only been disguised as a woman as the man had been disguised as a gardener, and the doll had been carried as a make-believe baby? Aggie now knew what these two vagrants wanted. Whether they were man and woman, or two men, they wanted the papers

which the Colonel had sewn up in his ottoman. She had made them prisoners at all events; her prisoners they must remain until the Colonel came home from Rexford.

And Aggie went on whistling and drumming with her heels as though the ottoman was as barren of contents as when she had first peeped into it—as though nothing of importance had happened that afternoon.

Two moments later the bell rang. She heard Mrs. Bryant pattering down the passage to open the hall door.

The "Spouts," Joan, Phyllis, Ruth, Patty and B#, all dressed in their drill tunics, came running into the room.

"There you are!" cried Patty. "Were they in McAron's room?"

"They were in McAron's room," Aggie answered "They are now quite safe under the piano in the drawing-room with the clock."

"Such funny things have been happening!" Joan exclaimed. "As we came up the drive we heard the rhododendron bushes crackle and move in the most mysterious way."

"Oh, it was the wind most likely," said Aggie. "Rhododendron bushes have a way of crackling in the breeze."

"Come now and show us where you've put the cups and things," said Ruth; and she took hold of Aggie's hand and tried to pull her off the ottoman. But Aggie would not budge.

"I've told you they're underneath the piano," she insisted. "You'll find them there all right. You and Number 3 are to wait in the drawing-room until I send for McAron, as I explained to you before.

When McAron has entered you are to creep into the hall. There you are to wait until I give the signal. So off you go now to join the missing property in its lonely hiding-place. Numbers 4, 5 and 6," Aggie continued, " will take their places on the left-hand side of the table." She waved her hand towards the table in the centre of the room.

" And you," said B♯, " where will you sit, Aggie ? "

" I shall sit where I am," Aggie answered placidly. " I'm perfectly comfortable." And she leaned back quite leisurely and folded her arms.

## CHAPTER LIII

### ACCUSATION

The moment the boys were freed from school they rushed to Woodbourne. Though it was not yet five o'clock, they crouched down behind the bushes, determined, at all events, to be in time. That at least one of the burglars would walk through the gates somewhere about the hour named, Peter felt quite certain. He was even more certain in his own mind that the person who would pass through those gates would be the one-time lodger at Chimney House whom Aggie had nicknamed Herr-Monsieur.

But though the boys waited and waited, no one who could possibly be suspected of having been party to the robberies passed through.

First of all there came the girls, Aggie's friends, Ruth, Patty, B♯, Joan and Phyllis, dressed in their drill tunics, each carrying in her hand a garden stick. " Girls are so fond of dressing up," was the only thought that occurred to Peter as they went chattering

past. A moment or two later McAron sauntered by. He was returning from the afternoon call which he had paid upon Mrs. Gale.

Then, just as the clock struck five, Peter heard the jingling of the harness on the Colonel's horse. The Colonel had arrived back from Rexford. At the gate he got down from the cart and passed through on foot.

No sooner had Peter caught sight of the Colonel than he dashed out from his hiding-place. The remainder of the Patrol followed their leader.

"Well, well," said the Colonel quickly, "have you great news to tell me, great news indeed?"

"Not yet," said Peter. He lowered his voice. "We're waiting for him now. Would you mind if we waited just a little bit longer, because we're quite sure to catch him?" And Peter told the Colonel confidentially of the mysterious message he had received on the previous evening.

But the Colonel was quite testy. The meeting had been called for five; it was after five now. He could not allow them to be unpunctual. So, reluctantly, the boys were obliged to leave their posts, and rather sheepishly they followed the Colonel into the house.

Great was their surprise upon reaching the library to find that room in the possession of those very girls whom they had seen enter some time earlier, dressed up in their queer costumes. Even greater was Peter's surprise to see his sister Aggie lolling quite complacently upon the ottoman.

Peter was all for turning Aggie and the girls out; but the Colonel would not hear of this.

"Your sister Aggie has formed a Patrol," he said.

"A Secret Service Patrol," piped in Aggie promptly.

"We call ourselves the 'Spouts,'" Joan volunteered.

"I have given the—er—er 'Spouts,'" the Colonel continued, "permission to attend this meeting to-night, since they, like you, have been engaged in the burglar hunt."

"Much good Aggie will have done!" said Peter rather scornfully.

"Love of sitting upon people seems to be a family failing," said Aggie sharply, as she played imaginary scales up and down the ottoman with her fingers.

"Now to work!" said the Colonel. "Now to work!"

"What have the police found?" Danger asked as he and the boys seated themselves in the chairs placed to the Colonel's right, the girls having already occupied those placed to his left.

"No—no, you've got to tell me what you've found first," said the Colonel. "But where is Aggie going to sit?" and the Colonel nodded towards Aggie, and made a movement to rise, so that for one moment the boys thought he was about to offer his own chair of honour to the Leader of the "Spouts."

"Oh, I'm quite comfortable here, thank you," she replied.

"How very unbusiness-like, sitting on an ottoman!" was Peter's rejoinder.

"Oh, don't judge too much by outward appearances." Aggie laughed gleefully as she spoke.

Peter had drawn out his written reports.

"I have a good deal to relate," he said, "but nothing very satisfactory."

And then, with Aggie sitting open-mouthed, and B♯, Joan and Phyllis listening intently to what was passing, Peter began to read out from his written reports all the adventures the "Panthers" had met with since the memorable Wednesday when they had

first heard of the Colonel's loss. The vivid description of the attack made upon Danger in the woods had been supplied by Danger himself. Great stress was laid upon the twenty-stone weight which had plumped down upon his heels.

So Danger had mistaken the onslaught by the "Spouts" for an onslaught by the burglars! It was gorgeous! Aggie rocked herself to and fro as she realized what had happened. The twenty-stone weight indeed! Poor F.F.! It really was very hard indeed on poor F.F.

Even F.F. had realized the mistake which had been made. She was scarlet in the face.

The tracks which the boys had followed through the rustic gate had been none other than the tracks which the girls had made in following up their own quarry—the quarry which Aggie rejoiced to think was now safely imprisoned within the ottoman.

Then Peter went on to relate the story of the vigil at Chimney House; and when Aggie heard how her own drawing, and the notice which she herself had left pinned on to the Tree had been the cause of all the trouble, she thought she would have died with laughter.

There was yet more to follow.

"So the suspects went to London." Peter had reached the point where he and the Patrol had gone to Chimney House and found the nest empty. "At least, made believe they went to London I ought to have said," he corrected; "and we thought we should never hear of them again."

"And you did?" the Colonel asked. He was not showing very much interest in these mysterious lodgers.

Then Danger took up the thread, for his Leader had

looked towards him; and to Aggie's amazement Danger began to relate, quite seriously, the story of the attempt he believed the burglars had made to force an entrance into his house.

"We very nearly captured one of the villains that time," he exclaimed, after having done full justice to the queer tapping on his window which had awakened him from his slumbers. "He gave us a very good clue."

"And the clue was what?" the Colonel asked.

"A bit of brown stuff," Danger answered, "which he left hanging to our railings."

From out of his pocketbook Peter produced the scrap of brown stuff he had treasured with such care; and Aggie, from the ottoman, recognized it as having been torn from her own coat.

From his reports Peter then read aloud the story of Copper and the trail. No wonder, Aggie reflected to herself, that Copper had rushed at her the moment she had descended from the motor! Copper had not been the fool which Peter had imagined; he had proved himself a very sagacious creature indeed. It had seemed that, quite unbeknown to the "Spouts," the boys had all the time been following up the tracks which the girls had left.

Peter was full of the story of the burglary at his own house.

"They came into my room last night," he said.

"How do you know they didn't come early in the morning?" piped in Aggie

"A man wouldn't use a candle early in the morning," said Peter. "I found grease-spots on the window-sill."

For once Aggie was nonplussed.

"I've written it all down, all about the 'sign' I

found," said Peter, and he pointed to the last page of the document which he now handed to the Colonel,

"I suppose the 'Spouts,'" said Stewart a little scornfully, "have also brought their written report?"

"Oh, I shall have some papers to lay before the Colonel in good time," said Aggie bumptiously.

"You're quite sure it was a man who entered your room last night?" she continued, looking straight at Peter.

"You don't suppose it was a monkey, do you?" Peter answered.

"I'm not so sure," said Aggie knowingly.

The account of Peter's burglary brought the adventures of the "Panthers" to a close, and the Colonel thought the pair had wrangled long enough.

"In a day or two we'll find them," said Peter. "If you'll only give us a day or two longer! We must be hot upon their scent."

"Well, as that is all the boys have to tell me," said the Colonel—he did not offer to give them the day or two extra for which they supplicated—"I suggest that we should hear what the girls have to say upon the matter. Now, Miss Aggie, suppose you get down from that seat, and come and take a chair at the table and tell us all about your adventures."

"But I'd rather remain where I am," Aggie persisted.

"It looks as though she were sitting on that ottoman to guard some precious contents," said Peter, speaking with more truth than he imagined.

"Oh, no," said Aggie off-handedly, "there's nothing precious in the ottoman; its contents are pretty rotten. The contents of that cupboard over there"—Aggie nodded towards the cupboard—"aren't much better either."

"Good joke, that!" laughed the Colonel, "considering there is nothing either in the ottoman or the cupboard—at least," he corrected himself quickly, "nothing of account. But now for your report," he said. "What have the 'Spouts' to say about the recent thefts?"

"I wish McAron to be summoned," said Aggie.

"McAron?" said the Colonel.

"Does the silly little goose actually suspect old Macaroon?" Peter muttered underneath his breath. "Why, I should as soon suspect the Colonel himself!"

The Colonel touched the bell. "Of course, if you wish to have McAron," he said resignedly.

McAron answered the summons promptly.

The "Spouts" were all eagerness. They were waiting for the moment when Aggie should give the signal which had been agreed upon, and Numbers 2 and 3 should, to the utter consternation of the Colonel and the boys, march in with the missing property.

"That young lady wishes to question you again," said the Colonel as soon as McAron came into the room.

Poor McAron's heart quailed as he found Aggie's keen eyes fixed upon him. Out of her pocket she had drawn that notebook with which McAron recollected he had been confronted before on a none-too-pleasant occasion.

"Let us see," she said, "it was six nights ago that the burglary took place? You are quite certain that an entrance was made through the window of the drawing-room?" she persisted.

"Quite certain, Miss."

"If the robbers had come in through the door, you would surely have heard it close?"

"Assuredly I should have done so."

"And you never heard a sound?"

"Not a sound," said McAron with conviction.

Aggie closed her notebook sharply.

"You have a remarkably poor memory!" she announced scathingly. "Six nights ago, according to my written account, you were awakened from your slumber by the banging of a door." For a moment or two Aggie sat saying nothing.

"I suppose I can go, now?" inquired McAron, longing for his release.

"Oh, dear me, no," said Aggie. "I haven't nearly finished with you yet. Last night you thought it possible that the clock, at all events, might be in Rexford."

"Really," objected McAron, getting a little irritated, "how can I possibly know anything about the whereabouts of the cups or the clock?"

"Had you spoken those words an hour ago," said Aggie very solemnly, "I should have been regretfully obliged to tell you I did not believe you. Now, I am quite aware that you are unconsciously speaking the truth. You do not know the whereabouts of the clock or the cups or the salver."

Then she sneezed twice very loudly.

No sooner had she finished her second "atishoo" than the door opened slowly. A clock outside chimed very clearly the half-hour.

The Colonel, astounded, sprang to his feet.

"There's only one clock that chimes like that," he said, "my clock from the mantelpiece!"

"Your clock from the mantelpiece," said Aggie as though she were introducing a distinguished guest. And upon these words, Patty marched into the room bearing before her the brass-faced clock draped with the red silk sash that Aggie had wound around it.

Ruth followed in her wake holding out upon the missing salver the Colonel's precious cups.

For one moment the Colonel, McAron and the boys were too flabbergasted to say a word. Then, suddenly they all began to speak at once and a general clamour ensued; but above the din and confusion rose Aggie's clear treble voice.

"There is the missing property," she said; "and there"—she pointed to the Colonel with her forefinger —"there stands the thief!"

## CHAPTER LIV

### DISENTANGLEMENT

The Colonel had been obliged to confess that Aggie was right.

Then the hubbub, which had ceased for a moment, started again, and it was not until the Colonel had literally thundered for silence that Aggie was allowed to tell her story.

This she did with a great deal of relish. She rather slurred over the vagrants whom she had followed on the first occasion into the woods. In fact she only mentioned, quite off-handedly, that at the outset she had followed up false clues.

The Colonel concerned himself no more with these false clues than he had concerned himself over the clues which had led the boys to suspect the apparently innocent lodgers at Chimney House. It was quite within reason that both boys and girls should have rushed off at a tangent at the start. Aggie hurried on to the moment when she had found the clock in Rexford, and when she had wormed out of Mr. Green

the surprising information that he himself had fetched it from Woodbourne three hours after the Colonel had told them of its disappearance. He had fetched it to be repaired, as the Colonel had ordered, on the previous afternoon.

"Yes," said Aggie, "the clock was taken away when we were all safely at our lessons."

Aggie had found out further from Mr. Green that when he had gone to fetch the clock he had been sent to take it out of the cupboard in McAron's room.

"I guessed at once," said Aggie, "as soon as I heard about the clock, there hadn't been any real burglars at Woodbourne at all, and that the whole affair had only been arranged as a test for the Boy Scouts."

Peter looked enviously at Aggie. If he had only had the luck to walk into Green's shop instead of her!

"Where the clock had been, there I guessed the cups would be also," she continued, "and I was not far wrong. Last night, to confirm my suspicions, I tried to hide in that cupboard, but McAron wouldn't let me. I could have told him then and there why he wouldn't let me. But I didn't choose to; I meant to wait until this afternoon." Aggie had determined in no way to spoil the dramatic effect which she knew she would make. "When he was gossiping at Chimney House I made off with the treasures. And that," she said, with a flourish of her hand as she brought her story to an end, "is how I found out the identity of the burglar."

"Yes, but the Colonel didn't try to enter Danger's house!" said Peter. "He didn't break into my room last night!"

The clock over which there had been so much

agitation, so much concern, this moment struck the hour of six.

"Dear, dear!" said Aggie, "I fancy that my watch is a little slow." And with these words she drew out from her pocket Peter's watch and chain, which she dangled in her hand.

"It's—it's mine!" Peter shrieked.

"Yes," said Aggie, "it was taken by the burglar last night. As I said before, I'm not quite so sure that the burglar wasn't a monkey after all."

"You did it!" said Peter aghast. "You burgled my room whilst I was asleep?"

"Well, I had to keep you busy over something," Aggie said, "and I didn't want you to stumble on the truth."

"But my suits!" cried Peter.

"You'll find them in the tin box in the attic. You'll find your cricket bat there as well."

"But my burglary?" Danger interposed—"the attempt upon our house? You don't mean to say you did that as well? You don't mean to say you left the piece of brown stuff hanging on to the railing?"

"Copper made straight for our house," said Peter thoughtfully. "Copper made straight for Aggie."

"Concerning the attempt on Danger's house," said Aggie, "to that there hangs a long tale."

And then Aggie related the story of the red silk sash from the moment she had tied it round her staff, fastened it about Danger's eyes, recovered it from Peter's drawer, to that very afternoon when she had used it as a decoration for the clock. She explained how it was she had purchased the new red silk sash which had led to the discovery of the clock. She told the story of how Mr. Green had lent her two-and-sixpence and kept her brooch as a security.

It was rather dreadful for poor Danger to learn that, after all, the ferocious gang had been only a handful of girls. Perhaps, though, it was even more humiliating for F.F. to realize that she had been looked upon as a twenty-stone weight!

Even the character of the suspects at Chimney House had now been cleared, for Aggie, in her general confession, had told how it was through her ill-formed drawing on her message to the "Spouts" that the boys had been misled, as, indeed, they had been from the very outset.

"I think the girls have been very smart," said Peter magnanimously when everything had been explained and thoroughly talked out.

But Aggie wanted to be equally magnanimous.

"It was luck all through," she said. "It was luck our getting first into the field through the boys having an Oxo class the day the search began. If the boys had been first in the field, we should have followed up their tracks just as they followed up ours. It was all accidental," she explained. "Until last night we quite truly and honestly never attempted to mislead you; none of us even dreamt we had done so."

"But the police," said Peter suddenly—it was only at that moment he had recollected the police—"our rivals, what of them?"

And the Colonel smiled.

"Baine was in my confidence," he said. "So the only rivals you ever had were rivals of whom you were unaware—the girls.

"You're a fine lot of little people," he continued, "boys and girls. Upon my word, England in the future will be proud of her men, and she will be proud of her women too!"

The Colonel was about to rise to show that the

meeting was at an end. The boys and girls were chattering together as hard as they could chatter; only Aggie, the person most concerned, sat aloof upon the ottoman.

Then quite suddenly the door opened. Mrs. Bryant was announcing a visitor.

"Mr. Rogers, sir," she said. "Mr. Rogers would like to have a word with you." Whereupon she ushered Mr. Rogers into the room.

## CHAPTER LV

### AN UNSUSPECTED DANGER

Mr. Rogers was a little disconcerted when he found a room full of boys and girls. He stood twiddling his hat in his hands.

"I only called in on my way back from the sale at the Cottage," he explained, "to bring the shelves which you had ordered."

"Oh, the shelves!" said the Colonel. "Yes, I called for them, and was told that they had already been sent."

"At the same time," Mr. Rogers continued, "I wanted to thank you for the men you recommended. They presented themselves on Friday, and since they brought a letter of recommendation from yourself, Buckley engaged them at once. I was absent at the time, or I would have written you on the subject."

"The men I recommended? The letter of recommendation that I wrote?"

"Oh yes," said Rogers. "Let me see—Bates and Wilson, I think they call themselves. I saw them for a moment myself this morning and thought them

very pleasant spoken, though I detected what I thought might be a foreign accent in one of the men's speech."

"Bates and Wilson!" The Colonel was scarlet in the face. "Men I recommended! I write a letter about a Bates and a Wilson! I say a word for any man with a foreign accent! Some mistake has been made, some very great mistake indeed."

"But," said Rogers, just as perplexed now as the Colonel, "I saw the letter which you wrote myself this morning—at least, which your secretary wrote on your own note-paper, stamped with this address."

"My secretary? I've never had a secretary, nor is it likely that I ever shall have one."

"The letter certainly was signed 'A. Frawde, Secretary.'" Rogers hesitated.

"A. Frawde!" gasped the Colonel. "I should think it was *a* fraud!"

"But—" stammered Rogers. The boys and girls were listening intently. "But——" Rogers twisted his hat more industriously than ever.

Then Aggie, quite unexpectedly, tapped imperiously upon the ottoman as though to attract attention.

"Mr. Rogers," she said, "these men came to you on Friday?"

"Yes, Miss," he answered, and he turned towards her eagerly. He was beginning to be a little afraid of the Colonel, who was getting very angry.

"This foolishness," he was murmuring, "this utter foolishness reminds me of the extraordinary statement McAron made to me last Thursday afternoon. Saw me sitting at my writing-table when I was down at Ashleigh station."

"Last Thursday afternoon?" said Rogers

"Strange, but the letter of introduction which the men brought on Friday had been written on Thursday afternoon."

Aggie hadn't finished with Rogers; she again tapped to attract his attention.

"Both those men," she said, "were employed as carpenters?"

"Yes," said Rogers.

"Colonel!" The Colonel stopped muttering to himself to hear what Aggie had to say. "Do you recollect the red-haired gardener whom you dismissed?"

"The fellow was a foreigner!" stormed the Colonel, "the fellow was a foreigner!"

"Had a foreign accent," Aggie corrected; "at least, that is what you said at the time."

"Yes, had a foreign accent," said the Colonel. "And—and—why, surely they can't be the same? The man Bates, or Wilson, whom the secretary I haven't got recommended, and who has, so you said"—the Colonel had turned to Rogers—"a foreign accent?"

"But he hadn't red hair," Rogers supplemented.

"The red-haired gardener hadn't red hair either," said Aggie, "he had only a red wig. Let me tell you all I know," she exclaimed, "for I really do know a very great deal; and I think that perhaps I shall be able to solve a great many of the mysteries which have been worrying lots of people lately.

"While you," she was speaking directly to the Colonel, "were inventing fictitious burglaries to give the Scouts employment, there were real thieves of whose existence you were as totally unaware as the boys were unaware of the existence of our Patrol, and who were meditating a raid upon your house. There was something in your library which they

were eager to get into their possession, and for this reason they disguised themselves, now as this person, now as that. On some occasions they were just themselves—men; on other occasions the couple presented themselves as a beggar and a woman—the woman carried occasionally a mock baby. Usually they worked as a couple, but sometimes they worked separately, as in the case of the red-haired gardener. From what has passed this afternoon I think that it is quite possible that one of these two impersonated the Colonel himself last Thursday afternoon. Without a doubt the two men who drove up in the black van on Saturday last to take away the ottoman were those two thieves, who, for some very particular reason of their own, wished to get the ottoman into their possession. That these two applied for a situation at Mr. Rogers', with the fictitious letter of which he has told us, I feel quite certain. I only began to find it all out last night, when I discovered the existence of some unexpected papers in the doll—the dummy baby, you know—which I confiscated from the hut beyond the Oak Tree. Before the hut was demolished in the recent storm it was apparently for some while the hiding-place of these two men. Only this very afternoon I learnt that those two men were in search of some papers hidden in the ottoman on which I am now sitting."

"My papers!" the Colonel screamed. "My precious plans! They have been in danger, and I was unaware of it! Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because I didn't know anything about the existence of the papers till this afternoon," said Aggie. "The whole story has taken some piecing together, for it is only in odd fragments that I have stumbled upon it."

The Colonel had rushed towards the ottoman.

"My papers!" he cried. "My papers!" His face was white as chalk.

"Oh, they are safe enough," said Aggie. "I saw to that. When the so-called carpenters were after them in your absence this afternoon——"

"After them this afternoon!" the Colonel cried. "Where are they now, those wretches, those spies?—for they are nothing but spies."

"Where are they now?" said Aggie. "Well, I'm sitting on one of them," she announced. "For one of them is in the ottoman, and his friend is over there in the cupboard!"

## CHAPTER LVI

### DISCLOSURE

As Aggie spoke those words she sprang lightly from the ottoman and flung open the lid.

In an instant McAron, Peter, Fraser and O'Neill had dashed towards it. Rogers and the remainder of the "Panthers" went straight to the cupboard; the girls had grouped themselves in a little cluster in the window. The Colonel, too bewildered to realize all that had happened, stood transfixed by the table.

It was Peter now who was directing operations. When prompt action was needed Peter could command with the ability of one a great deal older.

Out of the chest he and his assistants had dragged a more than half-exhausted carpenter. Finding himself upon his feet again the carpenter tottered so that Peter thought he was about to fall. He was giddy from his long imprisonment in that miserably small enclosure.

Rogers had unlocked the cupboard and flung the door wide open. Eagerly the boys looked within.

"He's—he's there!" cried Lambert; and such was indeed the case. In the cupboard stood disclosed a second carpenter, bearded like the first.

"Let some one go for the police," directed Peter. "Let some one else bolt and lock the window and the door."

It was O'Neill who went for the police, for O'Neill was a fast runner. It was Fraser who locked the door behind him and bolted the window as his Leader had commanded.

"They are foreigners, foreigners both of them!" the Colonel cried. "To think that England's greatest secret might have fallen into alien hands!"

Then something happened.

Peter, having secured the man's left wrist with one hand, was searching in his pockets to see if there were any firearms on his person. McAron, on his right-hand side, was doing the same.

The man had stood motionless until that moment. Then suddenly, as Peter was about to dive into the inside pocket, he wrenched away the hand which Peter was holding so unexpectedly that Peter, taken unawares, staggered back; and before he could steady himself or regain possession of the hand the man had pulled out of his pocket a bundle of papers. So quickly did he act that no one had time to realize what he was about to do. He flung the papers on to the roaring fire by which he was standing. The flames leaped about them.

"England shall never turn upon my country that which my country may not turn upon England!" he cried defiantly.

With an ashen face and grey lips, the Colonel

hurried to the fire-place. He knelt down upon the floor, and if Lambert had not dragged them back he would have thrust his hands into the burning embers in a vain endeavour to rescue his treasure. It was already too late: the papers had been reduced to blackened ashes.

On the drive outside there sounded the tramping of feet. O'Neill had returned with Baine and the police.

The Colonel knelt by the fire, his face buried in his hands.

Then some one came and laid a hand upon his shoulder. Some one was bending over him. It was Aggie.

"Dear Colonel," she said, "I told you that I, too, should have papers to give you. These are the papers of which I spoke." And Aggie thrust into the Colonel's hands a bundle of papers tied up with red cord.

With fingers that quivered the Colonel untied the cord. He opened the papers.

"My sketches! My sketches!" he cried. Then the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"But those?" he said; and he pointed to the few grey flakes which had fallen in the grate.

"Those," said Aggie, "were the papers, the blank papers, which I substituted earlier in the afternoon for those I discovered in the ottoman, and which I knew must be very precious, because in the head of the dummy baby, of which I have already told you, I found last night a plan of that ottoman; and the very place where those papers were secreted was marked with a cross. When I discovered the presence of the papers earlier in the afternoon I took upon myself to guard them, since I alone knew of their existence, and you, in Rexford, were unaware of the

danger which was threatening them. So I felt responsible, and was determined to assure myself of their safety until I had the opportunity of telling you my story; and it was well I did so. I left the room for a few moments only to return and find it in the possession of the carpenters. I found a shawl of shepherd's plaid and a bonnet in their bag, so I knew them to be the vagrants whom I had, in the first place, suspected of being responsible for the fictitious robbery. How I captured and kept them prisoners until your arrival you know as well as I do."

"I can't thank you, yet," said the Colonel. "I can never adequately thank you for all you have done to-day."

"I don't want to be thanked," said Aggie. "I'm a Girl Scout, and I was only doing my duty."

Outside the window the police had drawn up in a line.

"Let them in," said Peter. Whilst Aggie had been speaking, he, Fraser and McAron had been doubly careful in the guardianship of the man whom they had taken from the ottoman. He must not be allowed to free his hand again.

Joan was opening the window to admit the police.

"The papers which they would have taken," said the Colonel—because he felt that he owed the company some explanation—"were some very precious papers indeed—precious to England. It would have been disastrous to our country if they had fallen into strange hands."

The police marched into the room.

O'Neill had told the sergeant everything he knew of the spies in hiding in the Colonel's library. In the scuffle with Peter, the beard of the man whom he was

holding had become a little awry. His left eyebrow had fallen lower than his right. Baine detected this in an instant.

"Off with their beards and eyebrows!" he commanded.

The boys snatched at the beards and eyebrows of the spies, who were unable to defend themselves, so securely were they held in custody.

Baine was right; the eyebrows and the beards of both men were false. They stood there, clean shaven.

And then there burst upon the room the sound of a girl screaming loudly—a girl who was wringing her hands in a frenzy.

"It's them! it's them!" she cried. "It's Don Qui and my dear, dear friend Herr-Monsieur!"

## CHAPTER LVII

### THE LAURELS

It was the evening of the following day. The Colonel had returned from town. He and his solicitor had left as had been originally proposed by the early train for London. The events of the preceding afternoon had in no way affected the arrangements made before the presence of the spies had been discovered. The plans, whose safety had been so frequently imperilled, were now safely in the possession of the War Office, and the Colonel's mind was at ease again. The conspirators who had schemed to gain possession of the papers were in the custody of the police.

Aggie felt a little sore of heart that Herr-Monsieur,

her dear Herr-Monsieur, had not turned out all that she had believed him. She had had a long talk with Peter over supper after the capture had been made, and they had each tried to the best of their ability to be generous the one to the other. Where Aggie had walked unsuspectingly, Peter had crept warily. He did not rub in all the while that he had known the lodgers at Chimney House to be guilty persons. But Aggie was quite ready to allow that she had too easily given faith to strangers.

"But you found the burglar!" Peter had exclaimed.

"But you knew straightway," Aggie had made reply, "that Herr-Monsieur and Don Qui were rogues. If they hadn't left that morning when you rode down to accuse them after we had been out riding you might have discovered more."

Then Aggie had confessed she had sent a warning to the men, but she had explained that it was not owing to the warning they had left; they had planned to do so overnight.

As Aggie said this Peter had recollected all at once the turf-cutters. The turf-cutters must have been men fleeing in disguise—the men who had sought refuge in the cupboard and the ottoman.

"'Nothing of account in the ottoman,'" said Aggie, and she smiled for the first time as she repeated the Colonel's words. "There certainly would have been nothing of a Count there if he'd remained in that chest much longer."

So between them they cleared up all the mysteries; and each decided that the other was a jolly good sort.

The Colonel returned from London with a very

large parcel. When he entered the library he looked about him to see that everything was in order, for he was expecting visitors that evening. These visitors were Aggie and her friends.

No sooner had he seated himself before the desk on which so much of his labour had been executed, and taken out of his pocket five golden sovereigns, than the front-door bell rang.

"That can't be Aggie!" said the Colonel; "she wouldn't ring the bell," for he had purposely left the door open that she might walk in.

But it was Aggie all the same—Aggie and the "Spouts." She had thought the occasion one of few that warranted the ringing of the front-door bell.

The "Spouts" were dressed in their drill tunics. They were just as they had been when they had first lined up on that memorable Wednesday afternoon; even the controversial red silk sash had been tied once again round Aggie's staff.

"The 'Spouts'—the Leader, the Corporal, Scouts 3, 4, 5, and 6!" so Mrs. Bryant, previously rehearsed by Aggie, announced the little band.

The Colonel rose as the "Spouts" entered. They gave him the full salute, which he gravely returned.

"You're a splendid little lot!" he said; "a splendid little lot!" and he shook hands with them one by one.

There was a choky feeling in Aggie's throat. She scarcely knew why this was so. Perhaps it was because there were tears in the Colonel's eyes when he laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Aggie Phillips," he said, "I am an old man, and because I feel very deeply I cannot say very much.

You have rendered a great service to your country. In England's name I thank you."

The choky feeling grew worse, and Aggie did not quite know what might have happened at that moment if the Colonel had not unexpectedly taken his hand off her shoulder, pinched her cheeks in a playful manner, and changed the conversation.

"And now for the reward!" was what he said. He took the five pounds from his desk and dropped the sovereigns one by one into Aggie's hands.

"That's for finding the burglar;" and he laughed as he spoke.

Aggie was looking at the golden coins spread out on her palm. She had never held so much wealth in her hand before.

"I wouldn't take a penny of it," she exclaimed, "if I—if we—we 'Spouts' didn't want the money most particularly for something special." Then she threw her arms round the Colonel's neck and whispered into his ear. And the Colonel smiled and looked pleased and patted Aggie on the back.

"A capital idea," he said; "a capital idea!"

Then he went over to the box which he had brought from town. He lifted it from the chair and laid it on the table. The "Spouts" were already grouped around the table. Aggie approached it because the Colonel had beckoned to her.

"Now, I wonder," said the Colonel, looking very pleased with himself, "if anybody here can tell me what is in this box?"

The girls shook their heads, but they were nevertheless greatly interested in the parcel.

"Perhaps," suggested Patty, "it might be a new Sunday dress for Mrs. Bryant?"

"Wrong," said the Colonel.

"Perhaps it is a new cushion for the drawing-room?" B♯ volunteered. But B♯ was no more right than Patty had been.

"I believe—I believe it's something for us." It was F.F. who made this astounding assertion.

The Patrol turned upon Phyllis. They began to upbraid her, but the Colonel interfered.

"Upon my word, upon my word," he said, "a most sagacious member! You will have to look to your laurels, Miss Aggie; you'll have to look to your laurels."

F.F.'s round face was wreathed in smiles. It was not often she received such commendation.

"Now, who's going to unpack this box, I'd like to know?" the Colonel next inquired.

No one volunteered. Every one was too diffident, although every one's curiosity had been aroused.

So it was the Colonel himself who unpacked the parcel, and oh! what a long time Aggie thought he took to untie that string!

Having untied the string the Colonel took off the lid; but even yet the contents were not revealed, for layer upon layer of tissue-paper had next to be removed.

The girls edged nearer and nearer. Then the Colonel, smiling all the while, for he knew what pleasure he was about to give, drew out of the box five dark-blue skirts, five pale-blue jerseys, five red caps and five pale-blue neckerchiefs; five belts with pouches, and five haversacks. On each jersey was a shoulder knot of dark-green cashmere, and worked on each left breast was a sprig of laurel.

"What—what does it all mean?" cried Aggie,

her eyes fixed upon the wonders which lay spread out on the table.

She had not even dared to touch them with her fingers. Her comrades, too, could only look and marvel.

"It means," said the Colonel, "that some of the finest and bravest girls I know are to become members of that great body of Girl Guides which is being formed throughout the kingdom. Even as England has need of her men, so England has need of her women. In the time of warfare, who is it that nurses the wounded men back to life again? It is the women. So the women of England must learn to nurse the sick, must learn to search for the wounded who have dragged themselves into security; must learn to cook that they may tempt the uncertain appetite of the invalid. Yes, there is much work to be done for our country by the women. You girls of to-day will be the women of the future, so you must learn to be the women of whom England will be proud."

"May we try to pass the tests the boys have to pass?" Aggie cried the moment she had recovered from her surprise. "Can we start ambulance work this minute? When will you show us how to pitch a tent? Wouldn't it be nice if we had weekly meetings at each other's houses to cut bandages? Oh! it will be just lovely to think we shall really, truly help England."

"Look, look! what's this?" It was F.F. who was interrupting. She had been surveying the equipment laid out on the table, and investigating one of the haversacks. Out of it she had pulled a little tin can. She held it up before the wondering "Spouts."

"That," said the Colonel, "is a 'billy.' Every Girl Guide carries a 'billy' in her haversack." And he explained to her and to them its uses. The top of the 'billy' made a cup; the body was large enough to stew a dinner in; and on the bottom, the neatest little frying-pan was fitted.

"Is there a 'billy' in every haversack?" said F.F. "But," she cried suddenly as her eyes roamed round the table, "there are only five haversacks! Why, there are only five skirts, five jerseys, five of everything! Which of us isn't to be a Girl Guide? Which of us isn't to learn cooking and ambulance work? Which—which of us isn't to be allowed to help England?"

But the Colonel only laughed.

"By the way," he turned to Aggie, "how old are you, young lady?"

"I shall be fourteen on Saturday," said Aggie proudly.

"Fourteen," repeated the Colonel. "Well, the Guides don't as a rule have their leaders under fifteen years of age, but we shall have to stretch a point this time."

And then from underneath yet another fold of tissue-paper he drew out a sixth uniform. On the left arm of the tunic were two white stripes.

"This uniform," he said, "is to be worn by the Leader of the 'Laurels,' as your Patrol is to be called for the future. When you came to me first last Wednesday afternoon"—he was now speaking to Aggie—"I said I would reward you if you should win your laurels. A moment or two ago I said that you would have to look to your laurels. You have won them—won your Patrol, that is to say. Now you will

have to look to them to see that you and they together win fresh laurels—win the finest laurels that England has to offer in future years. Yes, Aggie, you will have to look to your laurels—you, who have wit, resource, inventive faculty and great presence of mind. These gifts were bestowed upon you at your birth. I do not want to see them squandered, leading you off upon mad enterprises. I want to see them put to some purpose. So I am going to test your power of organization, and I do not think that you will fail me. There will be no more empty hours on your hands, your days will be full to overflowing; and I think that I shall have every cause to be proud of the work which will be carried on by 'Panthers' and 'Laurels' in our little village of Ashleigh."

"I only feel sorry," said Aggie, "that we can't be 'Spouts' any more. Never mind," she said as she cheered herself up on this point, "the name we shall bear in the future will be a name that we have truly earned. I defy any one to prove that we earned the title of 'Spouts'!"

And there and then, in his library, the Colonel administered the oath to the newly-formed Patrol—the oath which every Girl Guide must take, in which she promises to do one good turn every day, and to carry out her duty to the best of her ability.

## CHAPTER LVIII

### UNITY

During the whole of the morning of that Saturday on which the "Hyenas" were to take tea with the "Panthers," the boys had been engaged at Colonel Norton's. He had sent for Peter and the Scouts directly after breakfast. He had kept them busily employed in chopping branches and felling a tree until the luncheon gong had sounded. Then he had insisted they must all stay and lunch with him. After luncheon there was a tent to pitch and some wonderful designs for making a rope bridge to be gone into. So it was not until nearly three o'clock that the boys were free to go down to their Club Room—their bare Club Room, with its unpapered walls and uncarpeted floor, in which they were to receive their fellow Patrol to tea at four that afternoon

It was not much of a tea they had been able to provide, only bread, butter and jam. They had bought it with the pocket-money paid to them that morning; for the "Panthers" must themselves buy the provisions for the teas they gave; it was against their rules to beg or borrow from home.

Peter had commanded all the edibles to be sent straight to the Club Room. The one possession of the Club Room was a large brown tea-pot. The Scouts would drink the tea out of their own drinking cups; so the hire was easily arranged for the forthcoming entertainment.

"If only we had won the prize!" said Peter sadly as he walked down to the Club Room, the other boys trooping after him.

"The girls deserved it," Lambert interposed.

"Yes," said Peter, "it was fairly won; the girls deserved that prize. I can't help feeling sad, though," he continued, "about this tea-party we're giving the 'Hyenas.' They did us so magnificently."

"Well, we're doing our best," said Stewart, "and we can't do more."

They were in sight of the Club Room now. They were rather surprised to see a thin riband of smoke rising from the chimney. They had thought to find no fire in the room until they had arrived to light it. The door was shut. Peter pushed it open, and then he gave an exclamation of surprise. The Scouts gathered round him, eager to see what had attracted his attention.

Was it really their own Club Room into which they now stood gazing—the unfurnished Club Room of which they had felt so ashamed? The walls were no longer bare: they were covered with a cheerful crimson paper. Bright-coloured Indian rugs were spread upon the floor. There was a writing-table in the centre of the room—a much bigger writing-table than the "Hyenas" possessed. There were wicker chairs and plain chairs, and over the mantelpiece was a portrait of the King draped with a Union Jack. In the corner, on a long trestled table covered with a clean white cloth that reached down to the ground, was spread a glorious tea. There were plain cakes, currant cakes and iced cakes—every kind of cake a boy or girl could fancy.

At first, the boys scarcely dared to enter this room so wonderfully transformed. Who could have pre-

pared this great surprise? Could it have been the Colonel?

Cheerfully the fire crackled in the grate. Then something very unexpected happened. From underneath the table there came the sound of a terrific sneeze.

"F.F.—you—you——!" scolded some one.

Peter and Lambert had rushed towards the table. In a moment they had turned back the cloth, and there, underneath the table, six girls were now revealed. Five of them were dressed alike in dark-blue skirts and pale-blue jerseys, with a laurel leaf worked upon each breast. The sixth was distinguished from the others by two white stripes on the left sleeve of her uniform. Pinned on to her jersey was a plain gold brooch; it had been sent to her at the Club Room as a birthday present from the Colonel. It was the brooch she had left with Mr. Green as a security for the half-crown he had given her.

The girls scrambled out from their hiding-place and stood in a row before the boys. The boys stood in a row before the girls; and simultaneously they saluted.

Then Peter stepped forward.

"You've done this?" he said, speaking to the girls. "You've furnished our Club Room! You've furnished it with the money that you won as your reward! You're the jolliest lot of girls I know!"

"Jolliest lot of Scouts," corrected Aggie, "for we're real Scouts now—Girl Guides—a *bona fide* Patrol. To the world at large we shall be known as the 'Laurels'; to our intimates, amongst ourselves, we shall always answer to the name of 'Spouts.'"

"Three cheers for the 'Laurels'!" cried Peter, turning quickly to his Patrol.

"Three cheers for the 'Panthers'!" Aggie piped in quickly.

It was a moot point as to whether the boys or the girls cheered the louder.

"We did it all ourselves!" said Aggie when at length the cheering had subsided. "We even papered the walls, the lower bits at least, for Pearson did the top part which we could not reach."

"We made the cakes," Ruth interposed, "all the cakes, for we're learning to cook."

"I made the big, heavy-looking one in the middle," said Phyllis proudly, "the one covered with angelica and cherries." And it took F.F. quite a long time to explain, when she discovered her words had been misconstrued, that by heavy she hadn't meant "doughy"; she had only meant ponderous and handsome.

"I lit the fire," B♯ joined in, "and I only used two matches, because Scout 1 told me I must use no more. Scout 1," she explained, "is Aggie, for Aggie is our leader."

And once again Aggie saluted.

"Yes," she said proudly. "I am the Leader of the 'Laurels.'

"We want to work with you, not against you." Aggie had approached Peter. "We want to help you if you'll accept our help."

And Peter, because he was too overcome to say a word, just went forward and gripped Aggie by the hand.

There, beneath the portrait of the King, overshadowed by the flag whose honour they were pledged to uphold, stood brother and sister, surrounded by the members of their respective Patrols. They shook hands, and in that clasp vanished the last trace of antagonism between the "Panthers" and the "Laurels." Henceforward they were to work together

In a spirit of mutual trust and helpfulness. Although a friendly rivalry did not cease to add a zest to their future operations, yet Aggie and Peter knew that it was the rivalry of comrades enlisted in a common cause, whose efforts were directed towards a common goal; and the motive that impelled them was the same: the desire to acquit themselves well in their country's service.

THE END